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F A I R D I A N A.





"She stood in the middle with a whip."

FAIR DIANA.

BY "WANDERER,"

AUTHOR OF "ACROSS COUNTRY."

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY G. BOWERS.

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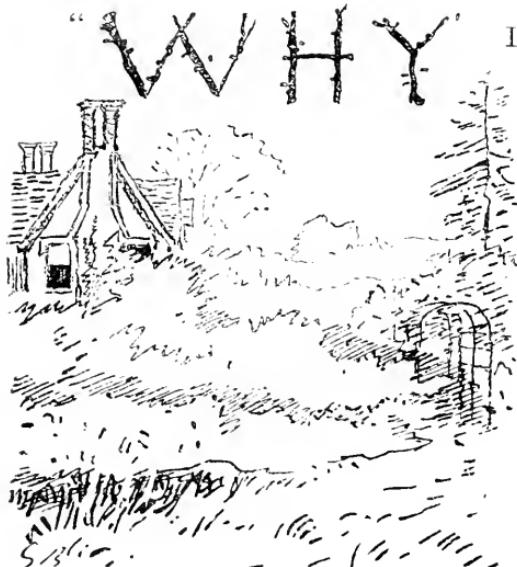
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FAIR DIANA.

CHAPTER I.

THE RECTORY.



“IT'S Ralph ! ” exclaimed four young ladies of various ages with one voice, as the low door of the Rectory dining-room opened and a form appeared on the threshold. “ Oh, Ralph, how glad we are you have come ! ” and the four young ladies rushed at their brother, who received their warm embraces with an indifference which he

would scarcely have displayed had they not been his sisters.

“ I wish you would let us know when you are coming, ” said a querulous voice from the sofa, “ so that we could get something ready for you. You should not take us by surprise like this. I don't believe there is anything in the house except some ham and a bit of cold mutton.”

“ Never mind, ” answered Ralph Branscombe, kissing his mother ; “ that will do for me. I did not come to eat, but to see my father. Is he at home ? ”

"He has gone round to old Mrs. Craik's, who won't last long, he says. She is getting very weak. But he will be back soon," replied Regina, the eldest of the sisters, whose long dress, careful toilette, and general neatness showed that she had left her school-room days far behind.

"What has brought you down, Ralph?" asked Mrs. Branscombe. "Anything wrong? I am sure there is something wrong by the look of you."

"Nothing particular, mother," replied the young man. "At any rate, nothing particular for you to worry about. How is everybody here?"

"Oh, we are all very well," said Mary, the second girl, who had been long trying to edge in a word. "And do you know, Ralph, Aunt Janet is coming to-morrow? Isn't it a lark?"

"How often have I told you, Mary," interrupted Mrs. Branscombe, severely, "that such expressions are quite unladylike. I don't see any particular 'lark,' as you call it, in the contemplated arrival of your aunt Janet. She will probably be much disturbed by your tom-boy tricks, and will be thoroughly dissatisfied, not without reason, at her short stay here."

"She is always dissatisfied," answered Mary, rather pertly.

"She is a regular old grumbler," added Selina, the youngest sister.

"Hush, children, hush!" reproved Miss Regina.

"I don't know why she is coming," said Mrs. Branscombe. "A visit to some old maid in the neighbourhood, I suppose. Nobody can ever foresee what your aunt Janet will do, nor give any satisfactory reason for her actions. I must say I do wish your aunt would select more convenient times for her visits and give us rather longer notice. We had a telegram only this afternoon."

There was a noise in the passage, a heavy footstep, and Mr. Branscombe came into the room. He was a man of about fifty years of age, though he looked somewhat older. He stooped in his walk, and his face showed the lines of care, while the corners of his mouth, which were generally bent down, gave his expression something of a deprecating look.

“Ralph!” exclaimed he in surprise. “How are you, my boy? Come down for a day with the hounds? I hope there is nothing wrong,” he added, nervously glancing first at his wife and then at his son, whose hand he still held.

“I have three days’ leave, father, and I thought I might as well run down and see you, particularly as I might go out and look at the hounds to-morrow. They meet at Batch Wood, don’t they?”

“Oh, is that all?” asked the clergyman, greatly relieved.

“Well, it is not quite all,” Ralph replied; “but I will tell you after tea.”

Then the conversation turned on Miss Janet Nettlerash’s proposed visit; but the Rector could not avoid casting repeated anxious glances at both his wife and his son. He had no appetite for the cold viands, and was evidently desirous of knowing the real cause of his son’s visit without any formal explanation. He put various leading questions so as to avoid the interview in the study which Ralph had foreshadowed. But the young man was too wary to be caught by his father’s very transparent artifices, and resolutely declined making any confidences before his mother and sisters. He soon finished his own tea and fidgeted on his chair impatiently. At last he broke in—

“Now, father, if you have done, I should like to speak to you in your study, please.”

With a deep sigh Mr. Brancombe rose very unwillingly, saying to his wife, with affected cheerfulness, “We shall be back directly, my dear.”

“Now, what is it, my boy?” asked the Rector when they were at last closeted in his sanctum. “You have made me quite wretched.”

“I am very sorry,” replied Ralph; “but I cannot help it,” and he stirred the fire and turned up the lamp. “The fact is,” continued Ralph, “it is the old story. I am as hard up as I can stick—haven’t got a sovereign left—and several writs out against me.”

"What is the use of coming here?" asked Mr. Branscombe, querulously.

"Well," replied his son, pushing his curly auburn hair back from a broad forehead, "I don't know that it is much use, but I thought you might help me a bit if we talked over matters."

"My dear boy," said the Reector, "you know I should be glad to help you if I could, but you really ought to make your income suffice for your wants. You know you are much richer than I am in proportion to the demands upon us."

"I know you cannot afford to give me any money," said Ralph, "but I thought you might be able perhaps to spare a pony just for a short time."

"A pony!—five-and-twenty pounds! Why, Ralph, my balance at the bank is scarcely that, and it will all have to be paid away on Saturday. I cannot understand why you should always be in such difficulties. Besides, what is the use of lending you twenty-five pounds even if I had it? You could not pay it back."

"Oh, yes I could, father," answered Ralph, "when my uncle Henry's next cheque comes in."

The Reector smiled faintly. "I fancy that cheque is pretty well mortgaged already," remarked he, drily. "Besides, it really would not be fair to your sisters, and I don't believe it would help you much either. Would five-and-twenty clear off all your debts?"

"No, indeed," laughed Ralph; "very far from it. I should want a good many ponies to do that."

"It really is too bad," continued the Reector. "Do you owe a very large sum?"

"Pretty well," replied his son.

"Why cannot you keep straight?" repeated his father. "I am perfectly at a loss to understand it. Here we are, six of us, with four servants and two horses, and all the claims of the parish, and we manage to scramble along somehow, and give you a mount when you want one. And you have a good allowance from your uncle, nobody to provide for, and your pay."

“Pay,” sneered Ralph, interrupting his father. “A hundred a-year?”

“Well, I wish I had that addition to my income. What on earth do you spend all your money on?”

“Well,” said Ralph, “you see a fellow must live, and must have a club. Then there’s hunting—you would not expect me to do without hunting, would you?”

“Well—perhaps not. But one horse is not so expensive to keep,” answered his father.

“And then,” continued the young man, “a fellow in my position in London is expected to do a good deal.”

“Then let them expect,” said the Rector.

“Now, father,” continued Ralph, “you know that is all nonsense. If you were considered to be the heir of a man as rich as my uncle Henry, if you were asked out everywhere, and expected to go in for everything like I am, you know you would not have the strength to shut yourself up and refuse all invitations, and decline Ascot and Goodwood, and dinners at Greenwich, and days in the Vale, and afternoons at the Orleans. Now, on your honour, would you? You are as easy as I am that way. Do you recollect going to Warwick Steeplechases last spring? And what a row there was at home because we came back so late!”

“I am afraid there is a good deal in what you say,” answered the Rector, after a minute’s reflection. “I am afraid, my boy, that we are both rather weak, only, fortunately for your sisters, your mother keeps a tight hand on me. But that does not help you out of your present difficulty, does it?”

“I am afraid not,” smiled Ralph. “I don’t know what the deuce to do.”

“Don’t say deuce; it is not gentlemanly in a clergyman’s house. Now what can we do in this matter? I wish I could help you. I would, indeed, if I could.”

“I am sure you would, father,” answered Ralph, cordially grasping the Rector’s hand. “You are very very good to me.”

The old man blew his nose noisily. “What is the total sum of your debts?” asked he again, after a few moments.

"About a thousand pounds," replied Ralph, making a mental calculation before he spoke.

"A thousand! Good God!" exclaimed the clergyman, alarmed out of his propriety of language. "And what will happen if you don't pay?"

"They will first take Peabody, then they will sell me up, and then I shall be bundled out of the office," answered Ralph.

"Misfortune and disgrace!" exclaimed his father, "misfortune and disgrace for the whole family. Poor Peabody!--such a good horse, too! This will never do. You must go to Sir Henry."

"My uncle paid five hundred for me two years ago, and since then he has allowed me, as you know, a hundred a quarter. How can I go to him again?"

"I see nothing else for it, my boy," said the Rector, throwing himself wearily back into his arm-chair. "It is a bitter pill to swallow, I know; but I think you had better go to Sir Henry."

"It is excessively unpleasant," remarked the young man.

"No doubt it is; but you know foolish actions always have unpleasant consequences. Besides, after all, it is not so unpleasant as having your favourite horse and your nice furniture sold up, and the bailiffs in your chambers; and then I think you are bound to spare us the disgrace, even though you thought nothing of it yourself."

"I don't think my uncle will help me," said Ralph, sadly.

"I think he will," answered the Rector; "but I tell you what. If you are afraid to go to him alone, I will go with you. It is rather awkward just now, certainly. Besides, your Aunt Janet is coming here to-morrow for twenty-four hours. But I will go with you next day."

Hardly had the Rector made this proposition when he repented it. Nothing was more terrible to him than to have to face his wealthy brother. Sir Henry was the eldest of the family, and inherited the estates, which were large, although for the time impoverished. His brother had a very small sum in securities only, and this he had unfortunately squandered in injudicious speculations many years before. Since then Sir Henry had by great

sagacity and unwearied labour largely increased the value of the estates, had discovered coal under his property, had joined several successful undertakings, and had thus amassed a large fortune in personality also. He gave the living to his brother, and allowed him a few hundreds a year. He had sent Ralph to Cambridge, and added to the young man's means when he had taken his degree. He had also other claims upon him, which may be told later. Nothing was more repugnant to the Rector's feelings than to beg his wealthy brother for more assistance, for no man knew better than the Rector what an excellent use Sir Henry had made of his opportunities, and what little use he had made of his own. Nor did the rich man always forget to remind those who asked for his help that they were unfortunate through their own fault.

Ralph, however, was too generous to avail himself of his father's impulsive offer. "No," said he, "indeed, father, you shall not have the trouble and pain of asking my uncle to help me. It would be bad enough for you to go on your own account; you shall not go on mine. I must do it myself. I will go over to the Hall the day after to-morrow."

"Very well, Ralph," said his father. "But your Aunt Janet is coming down, and she and your mother are sure to be quarrelling. You must try and keep peace between them. If you don't stop, the house will be wretched."

"Well, but father," said Ralph, "the prospect is not very pleasant. Can I ride old Lazybones to-morrow? Besides, I have only a few shillings in my pocket, and I cannot even live *here* without something."

"Oh, never mind that," continued the Rector, overjoyed at being able to keep his son for a day or two longer to act as a buffer between his wife and sister-in-law. "I can spare a fiver—here it is; and of course you shall have Lazybones in the morning."

"Thank you, father," said Ralph. "Very well, I will stop till Friday. I'll hunt to-morrow, and see my uncle next day."

CHAPTER II.

MISS JANET NETTLERASH.



HAD been willing to stop to make his aunt's visit less disagreeable to his father, but he would not give up the day's hunting in order to receive what he called Miss Nettlerash's first volley. This duty was left to Regina and her little sister Polly, who drove off to the station in the one vehicle which the Rector

boasted, an old-fashioned dog-cart, drawn by an equally old-fashioned grey mare. Kitty, however, though old, was very fast, particularly when she was going home, and she promised to do many more years of useful service for the Rector's family. It was about noon when the London train drew up at the Warborough station. Miss Janet Nettlerash's head appeared at the window of a first-class carriage. She wore a very large bonnet, decorated with a perfect kitchen garden of artificial fruits and vegetables. Some of her grey tresses, refusing to be confined in the bands which Miss Janet affected, had escaped from the boundaries of the kitchen garden, and were waving in the air like small rags, as signals to her nieces.

"Where's your mother?" was her first question after she had kissed the girls. "No, that is not mine. That bonnet-box, with the black bag, and the parcel, and the bundle of

umbrellas—one, two, three, four ; there are two missing. Where are the others ? There is a bundle under the seat, and the rug is in the corner. That is all. Now, where's your mother ? ”

“ Mamma was busy,” said Regina, “ and she thought we had better come instead.”

“ Well, I do think,” remarked Miss Nettlerash, “ that my only sister *might* have come to the station to meet me.” At the same time she threw up her chin a little, and held her nose in the air for the space of a few seconds. But only for a few seconds.

“ I must look after my luggage,” said she ; “ come on and help me, children.”

“ Luggage ! ” exclaimed Regina. “ Why, is not this your luggage, aunt ? ” pointing to the numerous packages which had been deposited on the platform.

“ Oh, those are only my little things. The luggage is in the van, somewhere.”

After some trouble two large trunks, and a basket, and a box were extricated from the van, and the train proceeded on its journey.

“ All that for one day ? ” asked Regina, somewhat viciously.

“ Well, my dear, there is no occasion to make remarks of that sort. I am perfectly well aware that you are sorry to see me at the Rectory.”

“ Oh, I don't mean that, aunt,” interrupted Regina.

“ I am very glad to hear it,” said Miss Janet. “ No, this luggage is for a fortnight. I am going to stop at my friend Mrs. Dawson's. Your mother ought to know Mrs. Dawson—a most delightful woman ; one of the cleverest women I ever met. Surely you have heard of her lectures ? ” and Miss Janet stopped on the platform.

“ But, aunt, hadn't we better get the things sent on, and talk about Mrs. Dawson by and by ? ”

“ True, true,” admitted Miss Janet, who had completely forgotten where she was, while expatiating on her friend's

acquirements, and gesticulating with her bundle of umbrellas. "Is the carriage here?"

"Yes," answered Regina. "Let me help you to carry your things."

"Not that, my dear, not that," exclaimed her aunt, as little Mary was going to seize a white bundle carefully knotted at the top. "That is my bird. Nobody must touch dickey's cage except myself." The old lady then seized dickey's cage with one hand, and two or three more packages with the other, and moved off towards the barrier, followed by her nieces and a couple of porters.

"Ticket, please, mum," said the official at the exit.

"Ticket, oh dear me, I don't know what I have done with my ticket." And Miss Janet put down dickey's cage, and the bandbox, and the bundle of umbrellas, and the black bag in order to search for her ticket. They were exactly in the way of the passengers who were crowding out of the station. There was an ejaculation from one man, a growling remark from a second, and at last a third said, "Now, old lady, get out of the way with them bundles of yours, please."

Miss Janet immediately ceased searching for her ticket. "How very rude the people are! I have a very good mind to take that man to the police court. Who is he, guard?"

"I am sure I don't know, mum. Ticket, please," answered the man.

Miss Janet then proceeded to raise her dress, saying it was extremely dangerous to carry anything in an outer pocket. Having succeeded in exposing to view a black silk petticoat of venerable appearance, she turned its folds over and over to find the receptacle for her treasures. Meanwhile the girls had removed the objectionable packages into the dog-cart, which was heaped up like a washerwoman's conveyance. They came back to find Miss Janet still looking for her ticket.

"I am sure I took one, guard," she said, persistently addressing the official by a title which did not belong to him.

"Ticket please, Mum."



"I daresay you did, mum," was the reply; "but we are bound to see it."

"You don't doubt my word, do you?" she asked.

"Not at all, mum; but I cannot take yours nor anybody else's," he replied.

She continued to search meanwhile.

"Oh, I know where it is," she said suddenly with a smile; "it is in the black bag," and she made a plunge through the barrier.

The official again stopped her. "Ticket first, please, mum."

"But I tell you it is in my bag," she said.

"Well, I cannot let you out before you show your ticket or pay the fare."

"But I tell you it is in my bag in the dog-cart. If you stop me I shall report you."

The man growled something very uncomplimentary about old women under his voice, and matters were becoming serious when Regina returned to the rescue.

"Oh, I will fetch the bag," she exclaimed, and at last the needed article was produced.

Miss Janet placed it on the barrier while little Mary held it securely. Miss Janet then extracted her spectacles from the pocket of the black silk petticoat—an operation requiring some time. She opened the case and adjusted her spectacles on her nose. Next she again raised her dress and put the spectacle case back into the pocket. Only then was she in a position to examine the bag. It struck her that for this purpose she required keys.

"I always carry my keys tied round my waist," she remarked, and proceeded, to the horror of the spectators, to raise the black silk petticoat also. There was another one underneath this, equally long and equally decent. It was of grey flannel, and the keys were visible dependent from a chatelaine of white tape. The knot of this had to be untied behind, and the keys then came down with a rattle on the pavement.

Regina picked them up, and in five minutes more Miss Janet

had discovered the right one. Refusing her niece's offer to open the bag and take out the ticket, she proceeded to rummage, and turned out first a pair of gloves, done up in a neat little silver paper parcel, then a spare pair of spectacles, next a bottle of salts, further two pocket handkerchiefs, then a fan, afterwards a railway book, and finally another railway book with the long-looked-for ticket sticking in its pages. She produced it triumphantly.

"There, you see, guard, you need not have been so anxious about it. I had no intention of cheating the railway company."

"I never said you had, mum," he replied; "but it's a good thing everybody don't take half-an-hour to find their tickets."

"You need not be rude," said Miss Janet, but the man did not wait to hear her answer, for he was glad to abandon his post, as the platform was now deserted by all except our party.

Mrs. Branscombe met her sister on the doorstep.

"How late you are!" she exclaimed, coldly kissing Miss Janet.

"Yes," said the latter; "really, Maud, I wonder you allow it. I cannot understand how it is that George does not take steps to remove that ignorant and rude guard you have at the station. I had to unpack all my things to find my ticket," and Miss Janet stopped in the narrow passage to recite the history of her wrongs, completely blocking up all access, and interfering even with her own luggage.

"You had better come in now, Janet," said Mrs. Branscombe sharply. "It is lunch-time. Regina shall take you to your room."

"Considering I have not seen you for two months," said Aunt Janet, again throwing her chin up, "I think this is a very cold reception."

"Why did you not give me longer notice?" asked Mrs. Branscombe.

"In *my* time," continued the old maid, "one sister's house was always open to the other. I suppose things have altered

now. You would always be welcome to *my* house, Maud, whenever you chose to come."

"Now go upstairs and don't talk nonsense, Janet," said the Rector's wife sharply, "and don't be late for lunch."

"Nonsense indeed," sniffed Miss Janet as she ascended the stairs. "What is the matter with your mother, my dear?" she said to Regina.

"Nothing that I know of, aunt," replied she.

In a few minutes all were assembled in the dining-room, excepting, of course, Ralph. In his honour and that of his aunt there was to be a late dinner at the Rectory instead of a high tea. The party waited for about twenty minutes, and sundry messages having been sent by the girls, they at last sat down without Miss Janet, who swept in after the children had been helped all round. They rose to receive her.

"At lunch already?" Miss Janet said with her chin in the air as she opened the door. "Well! curious manners, I must say. You say Ralph is here?" she continued in answer to a remark from one of the girls. "His work in London must be very easy if he can afford to come away like this. Hunting, too? breaking his neck or his legs, I suppose?" At last she settled down, but was silent only for a moment. "I am sure you will excuse me, my dear Maud," she said in a tone of affected politeness and affection, "but really I cannot eat this mutton. It is cold and greasy."

Mrs. Branscombe bit her lip. "I ordered it for one o'clock, Janet, thinking you would be here by that time. It is not my fault. Have some cold beef."

Regina hastened to carve some for her aunt. She turned the slices over on her plate, and then said "Regina, I wish you could find me a piece rather better done. Really, Maud, I wonder you can allow your children to eat raw meat like this. It is most unwholesome. Have you read Dr. Bradley's pamphlet on Trichinosis?"

"No; and I don't want to," said Mrs. Branscombe. "I dare-

say they could find you a piece rather better done. We most of us like underdone meat."

"A very brutal, savage taste," Miss Janet remarked with emphasis; "and one very likely to lead to serious diseases. If you won't pay any attention to the discoveries of science, I am sure George will. I shall give him Dr. Bradley's pamphlet when he comes in."

Then for a few minutes there was peace, but not for long, for soon Miss Janet, taking up a piece of butter on her knife, sniffed it suspiciously. "Is this your own butter, Maud?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Branscombe.

"Well," she said, "if *my* dairymaid did not make better butter than that, I should discharge her. What is the matter with your cows? I wonder you don't look after things better."

Regina had been fidgeting in her chair during the whole time of lunch. It was certainly not easy to sit quiet under her aunt's remarks. As to the younger children, they made no secret of their indignation. Pert little Mary cried out aloud—

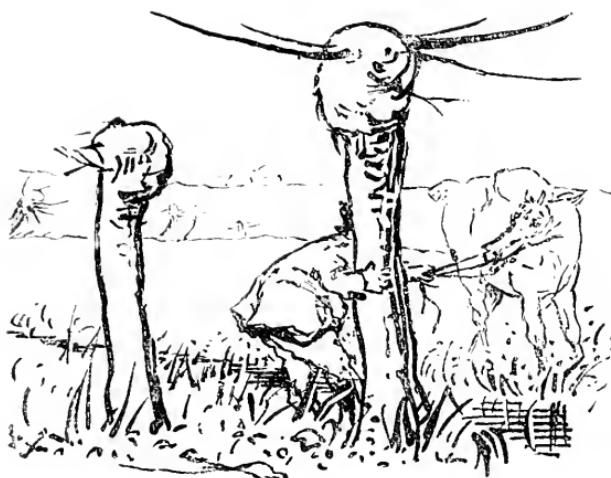
"Why, aunt, if you have got everything better at home, why didn't you stop there?"

Miss Janet flushed up angrily, but was silent during the rest of luncheon.



CHAPTER III.

FAIR DIANA.



NOW becomes necessary to go back a few hours and see how Ralph spent the day of his aunt's arrival.

Batch Wood was only three miles from the Rectory, and about ten from

Branscombe Hall, Sir Henry's place. Ralph therefore had time to eat his breakfast in a much more leisurely manner than was usual at the Rectory, where everybody was always busy, being constantly urged to punctual discharge of their various duties by Mrs. Branscombe.

"How fat he is!" was Ralph's exclamation when he dawdled into the stable to get Lazybones saddled. "Why, the governor can't have worked him at all!"

"Not much, sir," said the old man of all work—gardener, groom, and coachman rolled into one—with a smile. "Master's afraid to let the young ladies ride 'im, and he don't ride 'im much hisself. But he's always after me to see that I give 'im plenty to eat."

There was a tradition about Lazybones in the Rectory, a tradition sedulously kept up by the Rev. George Branscombe himself. It was to the effect, that Lazybones was a most diffi-

cult horse to ride, and that no one could sit him unless he possessed much experience and nerve. The Rector sternly forbade any of his daughters to think of riding so dangerous a quadruped. Lazybones was invested with a mysterious glamour of awful and perilous tricks. Mr. Brancombe did not exactly say that he pulled hard, nor even that he was in the habit of kicking and plunging, but he implied it; and it was generally understood at the Rectory that no one could possibly ride Lazybones except Ralph and, of course, Mr. Brancombe himself, who was supposed by the whole family to be the best horseman in England. As a result, Lazybones had not nearly enough work. He was far too good for harness; besides, he might smash the carriage to pieces—at least, so it was said—and the Rector had very little time to ride about, for his work was concentrated within a comparatively short distance of the Rectory. The horse, therefore, was only brought out on the rare occasions when Mr. Brancombe could devote a whole day to sport—for he did not belong to the modern school, and thought it no disgrace to his cloth to follow hounds over the wide pastures of the War-boro' Vale, or up the steep sides of the Eastern Downs. In the winter a fortnight often elapsed before Lazybones put his head out of the stable. When Ralph came down he had work enough, but the young man's holidays were not as long nor as frequent as he would have desired. The tradition, however, was consistently adhered to, and when, after a long rest, Lazybones gave a playful buck, this jump was quoted for weeks, as a proof that the horse was more dangerous than ever. As a matter of fact, a quieter one never was foaled. His age was against his being habitually unmanageable, for he was nearer twenty than ten. But the fiction might have had some slight foundation in fact some fifteen years back, and it had been kept up, first of all, no doubt, to prevent any possible accident to a parcel of young children who were all anxious to get on the back of anything with four legs; and subsequently rather as a matter of course—an acknowledged natural phenomenon, like sunrise and sunset. No one in the Rectory (except Ralph himself) doubted it; and

it was always understood that a really first-rate man was required to sit on Lazybones, whose name had been conferred on him as a good standing joke, it being universally accepted that a more lively animal never existed.

Ralph had his own opinion, which he kept to himself. He knew better than to upset the fetish ; had he done so, his sisters would have at once claimed the horse, and he could no longer have had the exclusive use of him whenever he came to Warboro'. But even Ralph acknowledged that things were going too far, for the horse was so overfed and so fat that he was really unfit to go through a day's hunting. He was a powerful brown, with strong short legs and wide hips, which would have been ragged if he had been drawn fine. Lazybones would have been up to sixteen stone when in condition ; to-day he had to carry twelve only, and danced along the turnpike road in glee at being at last allowed "a day out."

Batch Wood was a favourite meet, as it always held at least a brace of foxes, and there was a large field assembled. Hounds were already in cover when Ralph reached the wood, and nodding to male friends, while he raised his hat to the Master and to the ladies, he at once rode up to a girl on a thoroughbred bay horse. She had a slight and graceful figure : she was dressed in a dark brown habit, over which she wore a grey waterproof jacket, for the weather looked dull and stormy. Her low hat was set well forward, with a touch of coquetry, on a small and well-shaped head : jet black hair was gathered up under it, over the tiniest ears imaginable—ears like delicate shells. Her face was, at first sight, disappointing. A pair of very dark eyebrows, almost straight, and a nose inclined to be aquiline, gave her a very determined look, rather apt to frighten strangers away. Her large black eyes, too, were scarcely calculated to reassure a nervous man, so steady and strong were their almost masculine glances. Her complexion was pale, and her face oval—perhaps scarcely sufficiently filled out, but promising well for the years of matronhood. Her mouth was well-shaped, but not too small, and the smiles which frequently rippled over

it took away from the sternness of the eyebrows and eyes ; the latter would, at times, be soft, tender, and loving, like those of a deer. At least, so some maintained, but then they had been particularly fortunate. The young lady was attended, at a respectful distance, by a groom in unexceptionable livery, mounted on a handsome well-bred horse.

“ How are you, Diana ? ” asked Ralph, extending his hand.

“ You here, Ralph ? ” she said, shaking hands with him. “ Very well, thank you. When did you come down ? ” And scarcely waiting for a reply, she pointed with her hunting crop to a gentleman on her left. “ Colonel Mannering, let me introduce my cousin, Ralph Branscombe.”

The gentleman in question bowed. He, too, was tall, dark, and distinguished-looking. He was faultlessly dressed for hunting, every detail being carefully carried out to the most minute particulars. Ralph thought that his eyes, which were almost as dark as the young lady’s, scanned his own appearance with something like contempt. But then Ralph had special reasons for always being particularly sensitive about his cousin Diana Branscombe’s male friends.

“ Is my uncle here ? ” he asked.

“ No,” answered his cousin ; “ he had to go up to town ; besides it’s a long way from the Hall, and he is not as active as he used to be. We sent the horses on, and Colonel Mannering drove me over in the dog-cart.”

“ Confound the fellow ! ” thought Ralph ; “ this appears to be a new flirtation.”

But a holloa came from the other side of the wood, and there was no time for him to think more of his cousin’s ten-mile drive with the handsome Colonel. “ Tally ho ! Tally ho ! Gone away ! ” And then came the scurry and rush so well known to all foxhunters—the moment of excitement and joy which makes up for many blank draws and many weary half-hours of waiting. The careful Master had managed to keep the best side of the covert clear of horsemen and footmen, so the fox had a fair

chance, of which he took every advantage. Batch Wood was bordered on the other side by a lane, and down this the field galloped, to circumvent an impossible hedge which separated them from the fox's line. There was the usual jam at the gate out of the lane, and Ralph, full of running, was not going to waste time by waiting his turn, but jumped a wattle fence into the plough, and tore after the hounds, who were well out of cover with a good lead. The pace was unusually fast ; the ground was heavy, the fox headed for a well-known gorse within a mile and a half of Batch Wood, and a number of "knowing ones" kept to the lane, and then dodged away to the left, through a line of gates, to avoid nasty jumps and deep fallows. Ralph, however, stuck to the hounds ; he was by no means a road-rider, and would not have enjoyed hunting if he had not been close up. "Old Lazybones will gallop as far as Denton Gorse," he thought, as he roused the horse a bit at a forbidding-looking blackthorn hedge. So he did, jumping well, and going as fast as any of them. But there was no check at Denton Gorse. The fox never dwelt there a moment, but described a slight arc of a circle and at once left it for the open Vale. Seent was good, and hounds still well ahead of horses, the ascent to the gorse having induced the majority to take a slight pull. The roadsters here "nicked in," and like an avalanche all galloped down the muddy lane which led to the Horfield pastures. Through a gate to the right, still down hill, over a "rigg-and-furrow" meadow, almost as sticky as plough. Then across a water-jump, through Birch's farmyard, with its muck and its dirty pond and poached gateways : out on the lower side, up the grassy slope of Horfield Hill. Here the hounds fairly raced, and the Colonel rushed past Ralph, sending a dab of mud right into his left eye. After him flew Diana, her thoroughbred carrying nine stone as if she had been a feather ; and gradually Ralph awoke to the conviction that Lazybones was tiring under him. The horse slackened his speed without a pull at the reins ; he subsided into a canter, then into a trot, and before Diana disappeared over the crest of the hill he dropped into a walk.

"Cooked, by Jove!" said Ralph, watching the fast retreating figures, "I must let the poor beast get his wind, or I shall do him altogether. No chance of catching them again to-day, I'm afraid."

Looking about him, Ralph soon saw his way out, and walked quietly down the hill to a gate on the right, which led into another wide grass field, bordered by a little brook, and with a barn in the far corner. Beyond the barn was a bed of osiers, crossed diagonally by a watercourse. Ralph rode up to the barn, wondering what he should do next (for he was unwilling to give up all hope, ride home, and face Miss Nettlerash thus early). He jumped off old Lazybones, and slipping the reins over his arm, allowed the horse to recover his wind, idly gazing round. Suddenly his glance became fixed on a spot in the fence behind the little brook. Out of this fence appeared a tiny head, sharp, wary, and cunning. The head was poked out, and then drawn in again. Ralph stood motionless as a statue. The head appeared once more, and was followed by a body—a dirty, bedraggled body, carrying a still dirtier tail. The object darted across the field to the far fence, then turned, disappeared for a moment, showed again, and finally sneaked into the osiers. It was undoubtedly the hunted fox, who had turned short back. "Hurra! Tally ho!" Ralph could scarcely repress the shout, but managed to check himself in time. "No use hallooing," thought he, "scent is capital, they'll be after him directly, and they could not come any faster if I shouted ever so loud, and I shall see them all taking this beastly blind place."

So he waited quietly at the corner of the barn. He had not to wait long, for in less than five minutes he heard a distant wow-wow-wow, coming rapidly nearer. Another moment or two, and Sensible, one of the young entry, scrambled through the hedge and jumped the water. Straining after the puppy was Locksley, getting on in years, or he would have been first. As of yore, close to him Badger and Bouncer, last year's hounds, keen of scent and fleet of foot, and then, a few yards back, a lot of them all together trying for the first place. Some swarmed



"Cooked, by Jove!" said Ralph."

over ; some pushed through ; and before the body of the pack had crossed, Mark, the first whip, charged the fence a few yards to the left, crying cheerily, “ Forward my beauties ! forward away, forward ! ” Mark was not likely to make a blunder, nor his horse either, a tall, slashing thoroughbred, with big splints and curby hocks, but fit to carry a house, and fast enough for Liverpool. Scarcely had he landed when Ralph saw a well-known figure approaching. It was his cousin on her bay—still full of running and prepared to fly the jump. How well she looked as she rode up to the fence ! Sitting back, and her trim figure perfectly balanced in time with the horse’s stride, her small hands well down, keeping his head straight without pulling at him ; her cheek, which was pale before, now flushed with forty fast minutes, just one little stray lock of black hair blowing back, but altogether neither untidy nor flustered, her lips slightly compressed, while the light of enjoyment and determination shone in her black eyes. A slight chirrup, and the gallant horse flew high into the air and cleared hedge and brook without touching a twig. As soon as she was well over, Ralph held up his hand. Seeing his signal, and also the hounds feathering on the far side, she pulled up.

“ What are you doing here, Ralph ? ” she asked.

“ He’s in the osiers—the fox, I mean. Stop here and see them take that fence. He’s about done ! hounds will chop him in there. I don’t think he’ll run another yard. But if he did get away again, we could not have a better place than this ; there’s a gate into the cover just behind us, and a bridle bridge over the brook, if we want to go back. We can get to them either way. Look out, here comes Saintsbury Snuffbox, he’ll get over all right.”

Saintsbury Snuffbox was a gentleman who lived on his means, supplemented by his wits, a few miles from Warboro’. He was a little man of uncertain age, with a brick-red, weather-beaten face, a sharp aquiline nose, and long, untidy hair. He was passionately fond of the chase, and legitimate fox-hunting not affording him sufficient sport, he had accepted the secretary-

ship of the Holborn Vale hounds, a pack which hunted the carted deer. Saintsbury was a determined rider, and, as he barely pulled ten stone in his stockings, had no difficulty in getting well carried. His horse, a strong short-legged animal, showed no signs of fatigue, so Snuffbox popped over neatly, and cleared the place without hesitation.

Next came another pink coat—young Paull, the son of the county member—a fine, handsome youth whose pleasant ways and nice manners did much to keep his father's seat for him. Egerton Paull knew how to keep his own as well—his big brown, over sixteen two, just brushed through the topmost twigs of the fence, and landed safely; but his flanks were heaving and his distended nostrils showed that he had nearly enough.

“There's the London bruiser,” said Ralph, “I think he's about done. Two to one he don't get over. Of course he's bound to try, as Paull has jumped it.”

The “London bruiser” was the Honourable Seaton Delaval, a gentleman who rode but did not hunt. Unless there was a lot of jumping and galloping Mr. Delaval voted it a bad day, and he always considered it a point of honour to follow hounds. Even if there were a handy gate five yards on the right, he would try and jump the place where hounds had crossed. Hence he generally showed better at the beginning than at the end of a severe run. He would have stared if anyone had suggested that he ought to save his horse even if he had no regard for his own bones. The Honourable Seaton Delaval did not like being behind Paull and Snuffbox, still less did he care about being beaten by a lady, so he charged furiously at the fence, spurring his horse as he approached; the poor beast was willing, but weak, the heavy ground and the impetuous riding of his master having finished him.

“Two sovereigns to one—three to one he comes down!” shouted Ralph, getting quite excited.

“I won't take it,” said Diana. “Oh! look at the poor horse,” she cried in horror, as the bruiser crashed heavily through the fence, and the horse rolled into the brook.

Ralph was going to rush to his rescue, but a shout “Get out of the way, you fool!” stopped him. It was the gallant Colonel, who was coming along as fast as Mr. Delaval, and narrowly missed a similar fate. The horse pecked, half recovered himself, pecked again, and would have been in the water if Mannerling had not jumped off, quick as thought.

“Here comes Dr. Quayle,” cried Ralph, “and there’s the Frenchman too.”

Dr. Quayle rode straight for the fence till he perceived the gleam of the water through it, then hesitated, then again set his horse going; but the hesitation was fatal, the good old grey was tired, and glad of an excuse. He felt that his master did not care much about jumping the place, stopped dead, and began calmly munching the dry twigs of the blackthorn.

“Three to one the Frenchman shirks it!” called out Ralph again. “There! I told you so. He’s off to Shuffler’s gate.” This as a bearded gentleman of florid appearance, wearing a very wide scarlet coat, and riding a game looking brown horse just as if he were going to tumble off every moment, pulled up and then galloped off to the right. His ample coat tails flapped in the air as he went; his portly form was bent forward, and to the spectators he looked as if he were endeavouring to kiss his horse’s ears. But Monsieur Couvray seldom fell, though he looked as if he were always about to fall; and in explanation of this curious fact it may be mentioned that he never jumped if he could help it.

By this time those who had crossed the obstacle were all assembled at the osiers, in which hounds were hunting with loud music. The group therefore moved away from the barn, while horsemen who had found their way through the gate, or had “nicked” in by a fluke, successively arrived on their panting steeds by ones, twos, and threes. The gallant Master was one of the late arrivals; he was a heavy weight and in such ground could not possibly be to the front. Soon “Who-op” sounded from the covert, and the fox’s draggled remains were brought out by Mark, so that the proper function might be performed in the meadow.

"Fifty-four minutes without a check," said one, who had never been in it at all. "Fastest time I have ever seen!"

"Forty-seven, *I* make it," remarked Snuffbox.

"Over an hour," observed the Frenchman, mopping his forehead.

"Quite good enough for me," said the Colonel. "Don't you think so, Di.?"

Ralph looked round sharply at the familiar way in which his cousin was being addressed. She flushed up suddenly, and bending over, whispered something to the Colonel. The latter nodded. The whisper struck Ralph almost more than the fact that the gallant officer had called Miss Brauscombe by her christian name. He did not feel any happier when she said:

"I think I've had enough, Ralph. We are going home. When shall we see you at the Hall?"

"I am coming over to-morrow to see my uncle," answered he, "perhaps you can give me some lunch afterwards."

"You won't find Uncle Henry till the evening," replied Diana, "he is not coming down from London till dinner. Better dine with us."

"Thank you," answered Ralph, "I will, for I must see my uncle." Then, after a moment's hesitation, he ventured a leading question in what he tried to make a careless manner, "Any one else staying at the Hall?"

"No," said Diana, "no one except Mrs. Gore; she's there, of course. Good-bye, then." And with a friendly nod she turned her horse's head. Colonel Mannerling, who just condescended to a cold salute, followed her.

"Well," thought Ralph, "of all idiots Uncle Henry is the biggest. To leave a girl like that in the house with a fellow like Mannerling! Why Diana can't live without a heavy flirtation, and Mrs. Gore is no better than a statue to look after her!"

Perhaps if Ralph's feelings towards his cousin had been less decided, Sir Henry's conduct would not have appeared to him so idiotic. And considering how short the acquaintance, it was a little rough on Colonel Mannerling to put him down at once as a

professional lady-killer. But men in Ralph's position are not always absolutely calm and logical in their reasoning, and he turned Lazybones homewards in a very perturbed frame of mind. To him it appeared obvious that a new flirtation was going on, and Ralph knew too much of his cousin's old flirtations to treat them lightly. He rode very slowly, and Mr. Delaval, who was going back with Mr. Rowley, the local horse-dealer, caught him up. As they passed at a fast trot he thought he heard Rowley say—probably in answer to some question of the London bruiser's—

“ Oh ! its her new fancy man, I suppose ! ”

This was not reassuring. But perhaps they were not speaking of Diana.



CHAPTER IV.

THE ARM OF THE LAW.



various attractive gifts for the other girls. When Ralph returned he quickly changed his clothes, and then walked impatiently up and down the terrace, smoking his pipe.

"Confound the old cat," he muttered. "Does she think she can purchase the right of insulting my mother and bullying all of us by her presents. Regina says she was perfectly awful at lunch. I would much rather she stopped away altogether, and spared us both her company and her gifts."

His mother beckoned him from the window.

"Your Aunt Janet wants you," she said, as he approached her; "but put your pipe down, you know she hates smoking."

Ralph obeyed unwillingly, and stepped into the drawing-room.

"How horrid! you have been smoking again, Ralph," exclaimed

THE Rectory, the ill-humour of the younger children, and Mrs. Branscombe's own indignation, were very much soothed when Miss Janet produced from one of her huge trunks a complete collection of presents for the family. There were books for the Rev. George Branscombe, a china plate for her sister, a pretty dress for Regina, and

his aunt, at once. "Mrs. Dawson has given me a most valuable pamphlet, in which the evil consequences of tobacco are fully shown. I will lend it you, and I am quite sure when you have read it you will give up this pernicious habit. I cannot understand how you can allow it," she added, turning to Mrs. Branscombe.

"I cannot help it," replied the latter: "but I really do not think it does much harm."

"There you are quite mistaken, Maud. If you had had the advantage, as I have, of Mrs. Dawson's company, besides that of the clever men she assembles at her house, you would know that tobacco is one of the most mischievous drugs which can possibly be indulged in, second only in its baneful effects to alcohol itself. For the benefit of your children at least, if not for your own, you should read some of the numerous works on the subject. I will take care to bring a parcel down next time I come. Meanwhile, here are a few tracts of the Anti-tobacco League—a capital institution, deserving of the warmest support."

And with these words she produced from the trunk a bundle of those tracts, printed on a half sheet of inferior paper, which some of our readers may have had thrust into their hands at railway stations, bazaars, and places of entertainment.

"Thank you, aunt," said Ralph, drily, "they will be useful as pipe-lighters."

"I do wish," retorted Miss Janet, "that you would use your brains to think over these pamphlets instead of exercising them in making bad jokes. That remark of yours may be witty, but it is frivolous, and not respectful to your aunt. I cannot tolerate, still less encourage, smoking; and although I daresay you would have liked me to bring you a box of cigars or a nasty pipe, I have not done so. This is your present," and she produced a very handsome leather dressing-case, with elaborate fittings, sufficiently complete even for a young gentleman of Ralph's luxurious habits. "There," she said, "I have had your initials engraved on the tops of the bottles. I hope you like it."

Miss Janet was the only surviving sister of Mrs. Branscombe, and a year or two younger. Miss Nettlerash, the eldest sister,

had died seven years previously, but the whole family and all Miss Janet's friends had become so accustomed to this lady's christian name that she scarcely ever went by the style of Miss Nettlerash. Nor did she resent the omission. Originally each of the three sisters had had the same amount of money (about ten thousand pounds), but the eldest was an extremely careful woman, whose prudence was sometimes called by her enemies avarice. She spent very little, and made some very judicious investments. When she died and left her whole fortune to Miss Janet, it was discovered that the capital had more than doubled. Miss Janet was therefore decidedly well off, but it was currently reported in the family that she spent her whole income, and frequently trenched on her capital, partly by lavish presents, but still more in supporting various institutions such as the Anti-tobacco League, and others of a much more objectionable nature, and assisting impecunious artists and musical composers, by whom Miss Janet was in the habit of being terribly gulled. She often declared her intention of leaving such property as she might be possessed of to her favourite associations and such of her *protégés* as might not have rewarded her kindness by base ingratitude. And she lost no opportunity of letting her relatives know that they had nothing to expect from her.

Young people are more easily pleased and generally less calculating than older ones. Her nieces, and even Ralph, therefore, were more willing to accept Miss Janet's presents than Mrs. Branscombe herself. The latter, though generally polite to her sister, could scarcely conceal her dislike to her visits, and her impatience at her criticism.

"I never heard of such impudence," said Mrs. Branscombe to her son, when bedtime came. "My butter is celebrated in the whole parish, and only the other day Lady Blenkinsop sent down to know whether I could spare a couple of pounds. The idea of abusing my butter! It would be all very well if she had anything to leave. The silly old thing is wasting all her money on leagues and associations, and strumming foreigners and Mrs. Dawsons. I really think she ought to be locked up in a

lunatic asylum. But, Ralph, you will have to see her to the railway station to-morrow."

"Very well, mother," answered Ralph, taking up his pipe again. "I shall just have a smoke before I turn in." As Ralph smoked he was occupied rather with thoughts of his cousin and of the approaching interview with Sir Henry than with his aunt Janet. Never having been able to make both ends meet, occasional money troubles were inevitable, but hitherto Ralph had got over them with an ingenuity worthy of a better cause. Ralph knew that there were one or two "things out against him," and wondered whether the bailiffs would run him down at the Rectory. He felt that delay would be fatal, and he must at all hazards see his uncle within the shortest possible time. He did not wish to have writs or a judgment summons served on him at Warborough. Such a thing would ooze out at once in so small a place, and be unpleasant to his father, whom he adored, and the cause of many sermons from his mother, whom he feared. But when he had driven his aunt to the station to meet the train which came from London, and was to take her on to her beloved Mrs. Dawson's, something curious took place. Was it instinct or knowledge of human nature which made Ralph particularly notice an individual who got out of a third-class carriage in the same train, and looked about him in the helpless manner so characteristic of a cockney set down on the ill-lighted platform of a small country station on a wet winter's evening? It may at any rate be doubted whether pure politeness induced Ralph to approach the stranger, who was waiting until the solitary and overworked porter could disentangle himself from the clattering milk-pans he was endeavouring to get into order.

"Can I assist you, sir?" asked Ralph. "You seem to be a stranger."

"Thank you," replied the man. "I want to get to Mr. Branscombe's Rectory. Can I walk there? Which is the way?"

"A bailiff," Ralph muttered. "He will have me if I don't mind. It is a long walk," he continued aloud, "but I have my dog-cart here and will drive you to within a short distance of it if you like."

"Very kind, I am sure," said the stranger; "but I could not trespass on you."

"Oh, no trouble at all," Ralph went on. "I pass within a quarter of a mile of the place. Come on."

He led the man to where old Kitty was impatiently awaiting her young master. The stranger was bundled in and Ralph followed.

"Have something warm first?" he asked. "We pass the 'Pig and Whistle.'"

"Well, I am sure I am very much obliged," replied his new friend. "I don't mind if I do."

So Ralph ordered two glasses of hot "with." When they were consumed he ventured upon more delicate ground.

"I expect you have business with young Mr. Branscombe?" he boldly suggested as he took the reins.

"How do you know that?" asked the stranger, quickly and rather suspiciously.

"Well, you see," said Ralph, confidentially, "lawyers hear a good deal of what goes on in a small place like this."

"Oh, you are a lawyer, are you? Why, then you are a sort of pal of mine."

"And I suppose you are after something, are you not?"

"Yes, I am after Mr. Ralph Branscombe. A deal of trouble he has given me, too—judgment summons, you know," he added, significantly tapping his breast-pocket. "Sold all his smart things in his London chambers to some mate of his. We could not touch a stick. Had to run down here. Put us to a lot of trouble, he has," repeated the man.

"Sad dog, sad dog," sighed Ralph. "I am sorry for his poor father."

"I suppose the old gentleman will stump up?" asked the London man as Ralph flicked old Kitty, who showed an unaccountable desire to turn up a well-known lane.

"Don't know that he can," replied Ralph; "and I don't think he will," he added. "We know him pretty well hereabouts. How much is it for?"

"I don't mind telling you," said the cockney. "One hundred and thirty-five pounds and costs—suit of Sweeting & Co."

"Bill discounters, eh?" said Ralph, who could hardly repress a shiver when he heard the name of his creditor. Sharks, rather, he thought.

"Something like it," answered the stranger. "Do you think the old gentleman will pay?"

"I am sure he cannot," replied Ralph. "I don't believe he has got the money, or anything like it."

"Bad job, then," remarked the stranger.

"Well, I will give you a tip," answered Ralph; "all on the square, you know."

"Glad of one," replied the London man. "Willing to do you a good turn when I can."

"Well," said Ralph, "the young man has got some niceish things down here—jewellery and presents, and that kind of thing, you know. At any rate, there is something worth taking. Now, look here, you just walk into the room on the left when you get into the house. That is Mr. Ralph's, and that is where he keeps all his own property. You are all right there."

"Thank you, sir," replied the man, effusively. "My card, sir; may be useful to you some day. Let me ask you to make use of my services," and he slipped a greasy pasteboard into Ralph's hand, who, although busy with the reins, was able to give his dirty fingers an awful squeeze as if by accident. Ralph apologised humbly. "So beastly dark," he remarked.

"It is, indeed," said the cockney; "and it seems a very long way. They told me it was only a mile and a-half. Are you sure you are right?"

"Right," laughed Ralph; "of course I am. Country miles are very long, you know, but we are not far off now."

They were fringing the edge of Wortlebury Heath, no less than five miles from the station. This common is notoriously full of the most awful bog-holes. In five minutes more Ralph pulled up at a point where the road divided.

"Now," he said to the stranger, "do you see that light

there?" pointing to one glimmering out of a distant cottage far across the heath to the left.

"Yes."

"Well, go for that as straight as you can. It is only a quarter of a mile, though it looks further. Good-night, and good luck to yon."

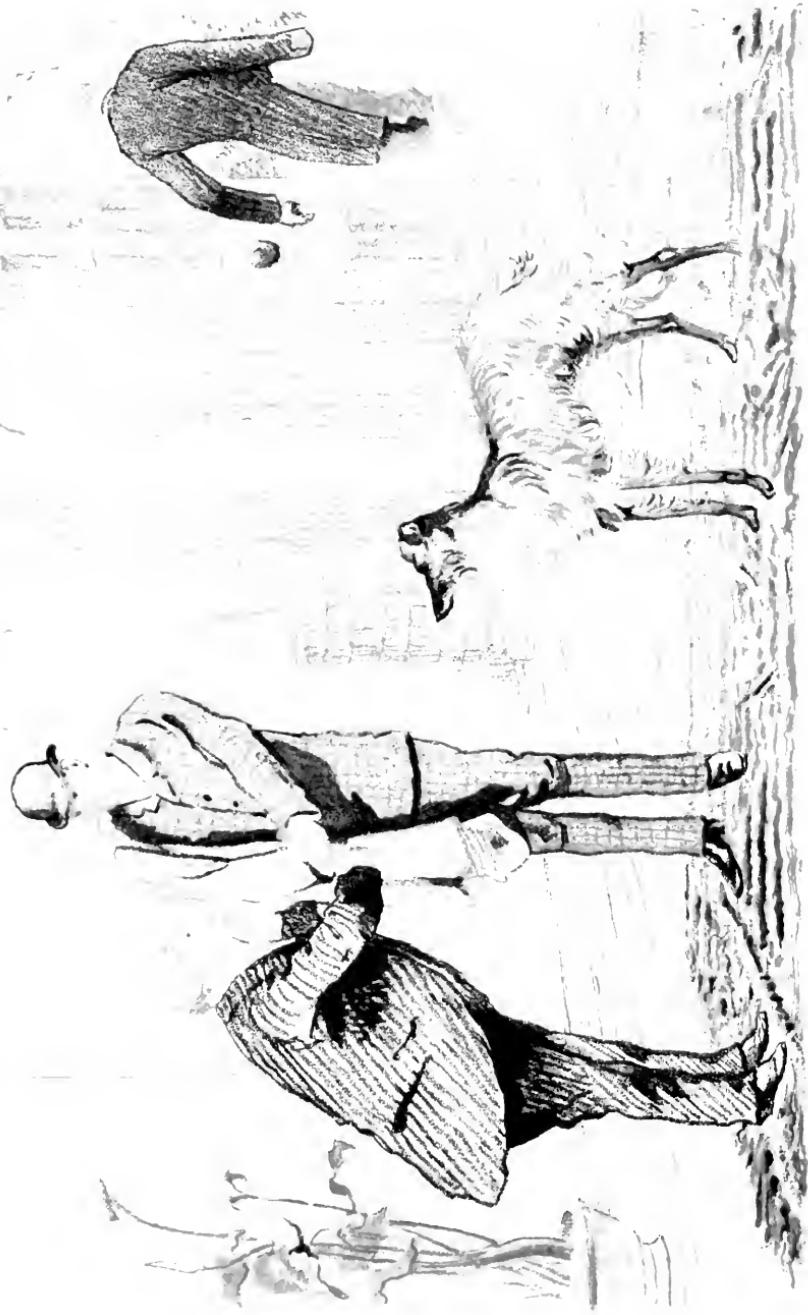
With these words he touched up Kitty and was off up the turning at twelve miles an hour.

The limb of the law walked straight on for ten yards, and then stumbled over some heather. Then he walked on again, and was brought up short by a furze bush. Having coasted round this, he found the ground falling rapidly, and lost sight of his beacon. He struggled on, however, through heather and gorse, till he was stopped by a new obstacle—soft ground. Then came some big stones and softer ground still. In five minutes more he was up to his waist in the deepest bog-hole on Wortlebury Heath, struggling in vain to gain a firm footing, and without the slightest notion of his whereabouts, nor even whether he should ever get out again. It began to rain, and rained harder. What with rain, and the darkness, and the bog, the stranger from London rather regretted having come down to seize Mr. Ralph Branscombe's goods and chattels.



"Ralph reached the Hall shortly before the dinner hour."

WILLIAM H. DAVIS



CHAPTER V.

MR. THROGMORTON TOMS.



LANA'S invitation to the Hall was too cordial for Ralph to neglect. Every kind word from her warmed him like a ray of sunshine; and, besides, he was not likely to miss an opportunity of observing how Colonel Mannerling conducted himself towards his cousin at home, having already satisfied himself that he was a little too intimate with her abroad. Ralph

reached the Hall shortly before the dinner hour, and handing his coat to the old butler, who had known him ever since he was a baby, he asked :

“Is there anyone else here, Pringle ? ”

“There's Mr. and Mrs. Toms, sir,” replied Pringle, “and the Colonel, in course.”

This was by no means good news for Ralph, nor did he like the way in which the man assumed the Colonel's presence to be a matter of course.

“Confound it,” thought he, “I wish that little beast Toms were not here. I suppose my uncle brought him down this afternoon.”

Passing into the drawing room, Ralph was received by Mrs. Gore, a woman who must have been very handsome when she was young. Her profile was finely cut, and though her cheeks

were worn, yet the outline of her face was still decidedly attractive. She performed the functions of companion and chaperone to Diana, and was dressed in careful conformity with those functions, without, however, the slightest assumption of mock humility. Her black silk dress was handsome and substantial, and her toilette all that could be expected from a lady moving in the best society, but who had already arrived at years of discretion.

Mrs. Gore received Ralph very politely, and in answer to his enquiry about Sir Henry replied—

“I am afraid he is not so well as I should like to see him. Sir Henry seems to have become unusually nervous and fidgety of late. He has been too busy in London, and we are very glad to get him down here for a few days’ quiet. He is not even so keen on hunting as usual.”

“Will he go out to-morrow?” asked Ralph.

“Diana hopes so,” answered Mrs. Gore. “We both think it would do him a great deal of good.”

At this moment Mr. Toms walked in. This gentleman might be of any age between thirty and fifty. His face was rosy with the rosiness of an overfed baby, and his bright complexion did not conceal the many small lines time had furrowed on his checks and temples. A few stray hairs of a colour between grey and sandy were dignified by himself and his wife with the name of whiskers. His head was extremely neat, and his enemies swore that he wore a wig. But no wig maker could possibly have contrived a head gear of so peculiar a neutral tint as Mr. Toms’ hair. It was parted down the middle, and carefully plastered on each side, but its colour, or rather entire want of colour, betrayed the age of the wearer notwithstanding his general assumption of youthfulness. Mr. Throgmorton Toms had a small round nose, long narrow eyes, eyebrows scarcely visible, and a round mouth which seemed to be constantly protesting and apologising silently. His chin was also round, and might have been almost pretty in a young boy. But it gave Mr. Toms an appearance of youth and greenness which was scarcely consistent with his hair and forehead. Altogether Mr. Toms might by a casual observer have

been taken for a good-natured fool, and it was whispered that he rather liked to be considered silly and green by some persons. But he belonged to the class of people who are by no means such fools as they look, and the furtive glances from his narrow slits of eyes occasionally betrayed to the acute observer that Mr. Toms (we beg his pardon—Mr. Throgmorton Toms) was watching very closely the features of those with whom he was speaking, and that he was not unobservant of what was going on around him. By profession Mr. Throgmorton Toms was a “City man,” and acted as Sir Henry’s agent and broker in many transactions. He had married a distant relative of the Brancombe family, and had for years worked, not unsuccessfully, to obtain as large a share as he could of Sir Henry’s confidence and business. It was therefore, natural to find Mr. Toms at the Hall, and yet Ralph was peculiarly irritated at meeting him there to-night.

“How do?” said Mr. Throgmorton Toms, patronisingly extending two fingers to Ralph. “You here?” as though it was a most extraordinary circumstance that our hero should be found at his uncle’s country house.

Ralph gave the little man one finger less than he had received from him.

“Your uncle is not very well,” went on Mr. Toms. “I am getting quite anxious about him.”

Now there was nothing in these words to grate on Ralph’s nerves, yet the tone in which they were said was most annoying to him. Mr. Toms’ manner implied that he, Throgmorton Toms, had a special right and privilege to be anxious about Sir Henry—to be always with him, to take care of his health, and to exclude disturbing causes. Nor was our hero quite wrong in his opinion, for Mr. Toms went on, pursing up his little mouth :

“Have you come over to see your uncle on business, or only to dine? You must not bother him about business, you know. He is very nervous just now.”

“I think I know when the time to speak to my uncle is convenient, or otherwise,” answered Ralph, much huffed.

“No doubt, no doubt,” murmured Mr. Toms, apologetically.

"No doubt. But you see we have been so much with him lately, and we look upon him quite as a father."

"Indeed," said Ralph, coldly, not particularly pleased at the suggestion. However, he had no time to make any further remarks, as Mrs. Toms and Diana sailed into the room together. The former was a stylish-looking woman, extremely well-dressed, whose age, like that of her husband, was somewhat uncertain. She was a head taller than he was, and would have had a fine figure if it had been a little fuller. Her Parisian dressmaker had, however, done her best to make up for the deficiencies of Nature. Mrs. Toms had light-brown hair tending towards grey, somewhat projecting cheek bones, a sharp *retroussé* nose, small greenish eyes, and a narrow and high forehead. Although therefore, her face was by no means attractive, yet her dress, and what her friends termed her excellent style and her imposing figure, made her look like what used to be called in the last century "a fine woman, a very fine woman, sir!" Mrs. Toms moved in the very best circles of society, a fact of which she left no one in ignorance if she could help it. Sir Henry Bransecombe and his household were just about good enough for her, because her husband found the old gentleman useful, but it may be doubted whether, if Sir Henry had been a man of moderate means, Mrs. Throgmorton Toms would have condescended to visit the Hall. With Diana she was on excellent terms, and made herself as agreeable to the young lady as was possible. She had got her arm affectionately clasped round Diana when they entered the room, and she greeted Ralph with a kind condescension not unmixed with a certain *hauteur*. He had formerly been a great favourite with her, but for some reason or other, probably best known to Mrs. Toms herself, he had for the last twelve months been distinctly cold-shouldered. He was no longer asked to the little *recherché* parties in Chesham Place, of which Mrs. Toms was so proud, and the lady now assumed a patronising tone towards him, which was very different from her former friendliness. Scarcely interrupting her conversation with Diana, she said—

"How do you do, Ralph? Sorry to hear bad news of you;" an observation which made our hero blush violently.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Oh, never mind; of course I ought not to have said anything about it," answered Mrs. Toms, composedly.

And it was impossible for Ralph to enquire further, as Sir Henry himself and Colonel Mannering at that moment joined the party. Sir Henry Branscombe was about sixty years of age. A year or two back he might have sat for the ideal English gentleman. His strong and almost rugged features were tempered by a kindly smile and pleasant glances from large blue eyes. His chin was shaven and his face bordered by a pair of old-fashioned whiskers, of which the bright grey suited his ruddy complexion. But now Ralph noticed at once that his complexion looked less ruddy, that his eyes were not so frankly open, and that he stooped more than usual in walking. He extended his hand to Ralph, but merely said, "Glad to see you, my boy," and then proceeded to the fireplace, where he stood looking into the fire with his right arm on the mantelpiece, and a foot on the fender. Colonel Mannering having nodded to Ralph, at once began talking of music and theatres to Mrs. Throgmorton Toms. It turned out of course that they had many mutual acquaintances, and before dinner was announced they appeared to be fast friends. Sir Henry gave his arm to Mrs. Toms, Colonel Mannering took in Diana without being asked to do so, and Mr. Throgmorton Toms of course had to be satisfied with Mrs. Gore. Ralph followed them into the noble dining room, where he sat down between Mrs. Gore and Diana, who had the Colonel on her right hand. During dinner, Ralph more than once puzzled over Mrs. Toms's mysterious remark, and wondered what on earth she meant by it, and meantime came to the conclusion that she had intended to be rude and disagreeable. He was altogether much preoccupied. Colonel Mannering's light and pleasant chatter about Afghanistan, where he had been attached to the staff, about the last new play, Brighton, mutual friends, and almost every other subject which could supply conversation in

town, kept the whole table more or less amused, but failed to interest our hero. He was too anxiously watching Colonel Mannering's behaviour to his cousin, and too nervous about the interview which he felt he must necessarily have with his uncle next day. The Guardsman, however, gave him no cause for anxiety by his conduct. His conversation was perfectly general, and only once or twice did he address himself to Diana, and even then what he said might have been heard by the whole room. Ralph was fain to confess that he talked quite as well as he looked, and that such a rival could not but be dangerous in the extreme. For the present, Ralph was not in the field at all and would have been very much surprised if anybody had told him that he was in love with his cousin. In fact he would have contradicted such an assertion flatly. He pretended to himself that he only took a cousinly interest in her doings, and did not wish her to flirt audaciously with everybody. Unfortunately he had had much cause of complaint on this score, poor Diana having been rather careless as to what might be said or thought about her. Many a time and oft had Ralph been made miserable by seeing women whisper when her name was mentioned, and finding men even in so public a resort as the Warboro' Club stop in the middle of their conversation if he entered the room. Occasionally he could not avoid overhearing some remark or other similar to the one which had shocked him on the previous evening. Whether his sensitiveness to such observations was owing to cousinly affection only, may be doubted. At any rate no other form of affection had so far been admitted by himself or suggested by anyone else.

When the ladies retired after dinner, Colonel Mannering continued the conversation on Arabs and Arab horses which he had begun with Sir Henry. The latter was much interested in the soldier's lively but unobtrusive account of his exploits on the racecourse, and even Ralph was tempted to listen. Mr. Throgmorton Toms, however, drew his chair up to our hero, and began in a confidential tone,

“I am sorry you have got into such a mess, my dear Ralph.”

“What do you mean?” asked he, angrily.

“Oh, don’t be angry,” Mr. Toms went on, pursing up his little mouth. “It’s no use. People cannot help hearing of things, you know. How will you manage with your City people if anything comes out?”

“If what comes out?” asked Ralph sharply, determined at least to find out how much Mr. Toms knew.

“Why, all these debts and writs and judgments and things,” answered that gentleman. “It would not look well for a bailiff to walk into Brown, Holland & Co.’s office, would it? Bad, very bad,” he sighed.

“How do you know? It is all nonsense,” burst out Ralph, inconsistently.

“Oh, very well,” remarked Mr. Toms, “if it is all nonsense, of course I have got nothing more to say, but I thought I might be of some use.”

“How could you?” Ralph asked.

“Well, you know,” said Toms, “there are all sorts of ways of getting out of a scrape if you have a few friends, but of course if you are not in a scrape there is no occasion for any assistance.”

“Indeed,” said Ralph piteously, and driven to bay, “I admit I am in an awful mess; but you cannot find a thousand pounds for me, can you?”

Mr. Throgmorton Toms was almost frightened out of his propriety. “No, Ralph,” said he, “I cannot. It is a large sum. But you might be able to make even that amount in the City if you knew how.”

“Perhaps I might,” said Ralph, “but I have nobody to show me how. Besides, I cannot wait.”

“I suppose you have come over to see your uncle about this,” continued Mr. Toms.

“I must say that I was anxious to speak to him on the subject,” admitted Ralph.

“You must not,” Mr. Toms asseverated, solemnly; “indeed you must not. He is so nervous and ill just now that any

request of that sort is sure to make him a great deal worse. He will probably refuse it and be very angry, and it would injure his health much. You must find some other way. But hush, we will talk by-and-by."

In the drawing-room Colonel Mannerling exhibited another talent. He possessed a soft if not a strong tenor voice, and he and Diana sang duets together. He stooped over the piano and turned over the leaves of music, and altogether they spent so much time close to each other, that Ralph became perfectly furious, and almost forgot the worry about his debts in the new worry about his cousin. Nor did Mrs. Throgmorton Toms improve his temper by remarking,

"What a very lovely voice Colonel Mannerling has! What a charming man he is altogether! Quite delightful I call him. I have asked him to come and see me in Chesham Place as soon as we get back to town. Is not he nice?" she asked, turning to Ralph.

This was too much. Our hero was quite relieved to be able to retreat into a corner and resume his conversation with Mr. Throgmorton Toms, which he was able to do under cover of the music.

"I think I can assist you, Ralph," proceeded that gentleman, "if you can manage with a hundred or so for a little while. But I beg you, my dear fellow, as you value your uncle's health, don't worry him just now. I am afraid," continued he, "that any step of the sort you mention might be most serious, and I am too fond of this kind and good man to allow him to be injured if I can help it. I would sooner make the sacrifice myself."

With these words he wiped away a tear which was supposed to be rolling down his rosy cheek.

"Why should *you* help me?" asked Ralph.

"I have told you why. To save your uncle anxiety. And I might put you in the way of earning a good round sum before long."

"I should be very glad of the chance, but a hundred is no

use," answered Ralph. "Perhaps I could manage to keep my people quiet with two hundred."

"Very well, my dear boy, I will lend you two hundred pounds for the present," said Mr. Throgmorton Toms, affectionately squeezing Ralph's hand. "Only not a word of this to your uncle."

"I am very much obliged to you," said Ralph, surprised at Mr. Toms's offer of assistance, although by no means sure that his reasons and emotion were genuine. "Of course I should not say a word about it."

"Hounds meet close here to-morrow," said Mr. Toms. "I suppose Sir Henry will give you a mount."

"Well," replied Ralph, "I was thinking of going up to town, I have only got three days' leave."

"Quite right, quite right," replied the little man. "Come into the library before you go, and we will settle that little matter at once."

When half-an-hour afterwards Ralph looked into the library he found Mr. Throgmorton Toms waiting for him.

"Here is a cheque," he said, "and of course you will just sign this acknowledgment as a matter of form. Put your name here."

"I promise to pay on demand," asked Ralph with some surprise. "Is not that rather rough?"

"Well, my dear fellow, suppose I died, I must have some sort of acknowledgment, you know. Of course I shall not enforce payment. Is it likely?"

Ralph signed without further objection, shook hands, and took his leave. Riding home he felt somewhat relieved, but still with a heavy heart, for though he might be able to stave off his creditors he was not able to stave off thoughts of his cousin and Colonel Mannering.

CHAPTER VI.

SIR HENRY GOES HUNTING.



ONE in Bankshire had been a more enthusiastic supporter of the hounds than Sir Henry Branscombe. When he came into the property the Hunt was almost on its last legs, and it was doubtful whether it could be carried on for another season. Subscriptions were falling off, foxes were scarce in consequence of the enormous increase of shooting, and sport was indifferent.

Sir Henry's father had not been much of a hunting man. His summers were divided between Newmarket, Ascot, and Goodwood, and his winters mostly spent in Paris. In fact he was almost an absentee landlord. His subscription to the hounds was small, and mostly in arrears. But when Sir Henry inherited the property things at once changed for the better. After the necessary retrenchments and economies had been carried on for a few years, during which the new owner paid flying but frequent visits to Branscombe Hall, he had made sufficient money in the City to spend a little on his estate. A better era then commenced. Sir Henry installed himself on a moderate but comfortable scale, and at once enlisted the sympathies of all fox-hunters by announcing his intention of subscribing two hundred guineas towards the almost exhausted funds of the

hunt. His keepers were informed that if there were no foxes in the coverts they would be at once dismissed, and it was not long before Sir Henry had occasion to put this threat into execution. Although his neighbours on both sides persistently maintained that it was impossible to have foxes and pheasants both, none of them could resist the example set them by Sir Henry Branscombe. When they heard how invariably foxes were found in the Branscombe coverts, how often a fox from them gave a good run, and how pleased the farmers were to have a landlord of such a stamp: when they saw that Sir Henry's popularity grew almost in direct proportion to the number of foxes killed yearly from his coverts, and when they discovered that notwithstanding his fondness for hunting, shooting friends from London came down in September and October and declared that there were no better mixed days than those from Branscombe Hall, they began to perceive that Sir Henry might be right, and that it might be possible to invite men down for big shoots without warning hounds off their estates or allowing them to draw all the woods blank. Gradually the Bankshire Hounds acquired a certain reputation. Sir Henry gave himself a very great deal of trouble to assist the Master in obtaining the best drafts from the Badminton and other celebrated kennels. He was always ready with his help, whether in the shape of money, advice, or active intervention. He was the more fond of hunting that short sight prevented his joining shooting parties with any satisfactory result. Being a bad shot, and knowing that he could not improve, he soon gave up carrying the gun, and stumped along with his friends, watching their prowess, and beating the turnips with a big stick. On such occasions Sir Henry frequently left the party while they were walking a turnip-field to go and have a chat with a farmer and see how he was keeping his land, or to pay a visit to a tenant's wife to enquire after the poultry, to pat the rosy-cheeked children on the head, and to leave them with sundry tips of shillings and sixpences. These afternoon visits were useful in two respects—they increased his popularity enormously, and at the same time

enabled him to know exactly what each of his tenants was doing. He listened with extraordinary patience to a long tale of misery from some overworked woman, how her children had fallen sick one after the other, how she had lost her favourite cow, how the good man could not pay his rent, and how the apparent neglect of the nine-acre field was owing to insufficiency of stock. Sir Henry would listen to such a story, gazing vacantly into the fire. He would go away, leaving the poor woman under the impression that he had not heard her tale, or, if he had, that he took no interest in it. But it invariably happened that matters were enquired into. Sir Henry was a strictly just man, and it was seldom that a mere pitiful story of distress moved him to immediate generosity. He would first find out whether the man and his wife had done all they could to keep their heads above water. If not, if they turned out on enquiry to be undesirable tenants, Sir Henry, who never granted leases, would immediately serve them with a notice, and follow this notice up with a visit. He would advise them how to set to work, would assist with seed, a little money, or even with a gift of a cow. But if his advice and help proved useless the careless tenant might be sure to be turned out of his farm when the notice had expired. On the other hand, when farmers had fallen into undeserved misfortune, Sir Henry would help them in every possible way, and not one of those who had done their best would ever receive notice to quit. His manner was always reserved and apparently abstracted. His acts, however, showed that the welfare of his tenants was a matter of as great importance to him as the improvement of his estate. Sir Henry was in his earlier years a very hard rider. When his fortune increased as he grew older he devoted much care and money to his stables and to his horses. About the latter he was curiously fidgety for a man of large means and large income. He placed infinite confidence in his stud groom Boulter, who had been with him for more than twenty years, and had risen from being helper when there were only two horses in the stable to his present position as manager of twenty. Boulter had been a good helper and a capital groom, but as

master of the horse Boulter was not in the right place. It is true that Sir Henry's horses were always in good condition, and that he never allowed his master to buy a bad one. But on the other hand, Sir Henry had to pay a great deal too much for a good one. James Boulter found out that Sir Henry Branscombe was now no longer so particular as to details as he used to be, that he did not as of yore spend a couple of hours daily in the stables, that the accounts for oats, straw, or stable requisites were no longer scrutinised as they formerly were, and that as money became more plentiful with Sir Henry so did his conduct towards Boulter become easier and more lavish. Now it cannot be denied that Boulter took every advantage of this circumstance. There was a story on the subject which could not be told in Sir Henry's presence without arousing the worthy baronet's anger. It was as follows. Once upon a time Ralph had a quiet handy hunter whom he had picked up for fifty pounds at a sale of coach horses. In Ralph's hands the horse improved very much, and on one occasion when hunting with the Blankshire Sir Henry had been particularly pleased with the animal's quiet manners, combined as they were with excellent jumping and good speed. He praised the horse highly, and Ralph, who was an extremely good-natured fellow, and always glad if he could please his uncle, and thus make some slight return for the kindness he had received from him, at once offered to give up the horse to Sir Henry at the price he paid for it—far below its real value. The old gentleman was rather pleased with the offer, and got on the horse for a few minutes to see how he liked his paces.

"Well, Ralph," he said when he got off at his door, "I think I like the horse, and I will take him, but first Boulter must have a look at him."

Now Ralph was no great friend of Boulter's, because the young man did not think it necessary to tip him largely whenever he rode one of his uncle's horses, which, by the by, was not of very frequent occurrence, as Sir Henry had an idea, fostered by Boulter, that anyone but himself would spoil their mouths. So when the stud groom had examined the horse, he reported to his

master as follows: "Horse won't suit you, Sir Henry. He aint what I call a safe horse. Might come down on the road with you any day, Sir Henry. Would not undertake the responsibility of recommending you to buy him, Sir Henry." On which the baronet, with a sigh of regret, for really no horse had pleased him so well as this one of Ralph's, abandoned the idea. Shortly afterwards Ralph suffered from one of his recurrent periods of impecuniosity, and a London dealer having seen the horse out with a well-known pack of stag-hounds offered him a hundred for it, which he at once accepted. Sir Henry was still on the look out for a comfortable animal to carry him, and Boulter visited this dealer's stables. Soon he informed his master that Mr. Bedford had just the very horse to suit him, Sir Henry offered Mr. Bedford his usual terms, namely, ten pounds and all expenses from London to Brancombe Hall and back, including an insurance ticket, for a week's trial. Sir Henry was so good a customer that no dealer in London would have declined terms even less liberal. So Mr. Bedford's horse was installed at Brancombe Hall, and Sir Henry rode him once to hounds, besides hacking him two or three times. He was delighted with the animal. He had not had such a nice mount since he tried his nephew's, some time back. What was the price? Two hundred. Sir Henry thought this a good deal, but the horse suited him so well that he signed a cheque without any hesitation.

Ralph was almost disinherited on the spot and expelled from the Hall when, a few weeks afterwards, he naïvely remarked to his uncle:

"Why, uncle, you have bought my Prince Adam after all. Did you get him from Bedford?"

Sir Henry told his nephew that he was mistaken, that the horse was much bigger than Prince Adam, had better fore legs, was of a lighter colour, and quite a different horse altogether. Ralph being still incredulous, he sent for Boulter, who swore it was not the same horse at all, and told a fictitious history of the new purchase's antecedents. When Ralph still persisted, Sir Henry became very angry, and serious consequences might

have ensued if the young man had not at the eleventh hour pretended to be convinced of his own mistake. The old gentleman, however, must have had some latent suspicion that he had been done, for it was quite sufficient to mention the name of Prince Adam for him to become morose and sulky; while a wag who had heard the story from Ralph and chaffed the baronet about having bought his nephew's horse back at four times the price originally asked, was ordered out of the house on the spot. James had a history, if not a pedigree, for every animal in the stable, and Prince Adam was known at Branscombe Hall as "Peterborough," as he was supposed to have come from the stud of the earl of that name.

On the morning after Ralph's visit, Sir Henry sallied forth on Peterborough, accompanied by Diana, Colonel Mannering, and Mr. Throgmorton Toms. Colonel Mannering was mounted on a black mare, an old favourite of Sir Henry's, who rejoiced in the name of Black Swan. Mr. Throgmorton Toms rode a cob, for he was only going, he said, to "see hounds throw off," as he was not much of a rider, and did not care about jumping. The cob ambled along very pleasantly, while Mr. Throgmorton Toms entertained Sir Henry with a long and not uninteresting account of his doings in the City, operations in sundry Transatlantic stock, prospects of various railway companies, electric light swindles, and similar topics. Colonel Mannering rode behind with Diana. The meet was only a couple of miles from the Hall, and it was proposed to draw Sir Henry's outlying coverts. The party was accompanied by two grooms, quite as well mounted as the rest. One was Sir Henry's special attendant; the other rode a second horse. The old gentleman was generally much interested in Mr. Throgmorton Toms's City anecdotes, but to-day he looked nervously over his shoulder more than once. His anxiety might have been ascribed to the circumstance that Colonel Mannering was in close conversation with his niece. The hypothesis, however, would have been a wrong one, for soon Sir Henry pulled up and beckoned to the guardsman.

"I wish you would ride with me a little," he said. "Black

Swan seems to fidget very much. Cannot you make her walk?"

The guardsman was a good rider, but somehow he did not seem able to prevent the black mare from tearing at the bridle, throwing her head up, and occasionally even plunging. Sir Henry watched him for some time.

"Don't hold her so much on the curb," he remarked.

The Colonel obeyed, when the mare immediately started off at a furious gallop, and was checked only by the use of the bit, which Sir Henry had condemned.

"I am afraid you cannot do without it, Mannerling," said Sir Henry. "*I can.*"

The Colonel smiled rather superciliously. "Fancy the old gentleman thinking he can hold a horse better than I can," he said to himself; but he tried to reduce the mare to submission, and succeeded only in causing her to jump along the road in a series of bucks.

"This won't do," Sir Henry said. "The mare's mouth will be altogether spoiled," and he hailed one of his grooms.

"We will change horses, Colonel Mannerling," he said.

Sir Henry got off Peterborough and was helped on to Black Swan. The second horseman took Peterborough, and the Colonel was mounted on Sir Henry's second string. After a few bucks Black Swan subsided into a walk. Colonel Mannerling could hardly believe his eyes. The mare whom he had not been able to control, notwithstanding all his experience, was now perfectly amenable to the snaffle alone.

"What wonderful hands you must have, Sir Henry," he said.

"Yes," replied Sir Henry, whom the remark restored to his usual good temper; "they say I have got good hands. They will all of them go with me when they won't go with others. That is why I don't like people to ride my horses if I can help it. That question of hands is a very curious one. Some people ride all their lives, ride all sorts of horses under all circumstances, and never acquire the touch which others of half the experience seem to possess almost instinctively. No lessons

will teach a man to have good hands. Many horses are sold by their owners because they refuse, or because they pull so hard, or because they fidget. The animal goes at a comparatively low figure because he has been seen stopping at some small hedge or pulling his rider's arms off in a run, or bucking and plunging at the covert side. The owner is glad to get rid of him with the loss of half the money he gave; and, hearing that the purchaser hunts in the same country, looks out for him at the next meet. He is much surprised to find his wild and fidgety horse perfectly quiet, patiently waiting for the cry of 'Tally ho! Gone away!' He watches his performance with some curiosity, 'For,' says he to himself, or even perhaps to his friends, 'Smith is all very well, but he is not the man to make that horse jump. Why, I could not, and everybody knows that I can ride a good deal straighter than Smith.' So, perhaps, he can; but, when he lies behind and watches Smith's performance, his surprise is still greater at seeing the horse take a post and rails without the slightest hesitation, and never even stop to look at a wide ditch full of water which a fortnight ago would have prevented him going any further on that day. Smith does it with his hands. He cannot explain it himself, but the fact remains. He can keep his horse quiet when necessary, and make him go when required without any trouble, with but little use of the curb, and none of spur, while the former owner, good rider though he might be, was quite unable to make the horse stop when he wanted it to, or go when he was determined to stop."

Just then the party arrived at the meet, and more hats were removed to greet the worthy baronet than if he had been the Master himself. Sir Henry's subscription was now five hundred guineas, and all knew that he was the mainstay of the hunt. They had met, too, on his land, and were going to draw his coverts—all reasons for greeting him with substantial warmth.

"Sir Henry does not look quite so well as usual," said young Paull to Dr. Quayle.

"No," said the Doctor. "He stoops more than ever, and I don't like his complexion."

"I am main glad to see Sir Henry out again," said Snow, his largest tenant; "but I *do* wish he looked a bit heartier."

"I hope you are well, Sir Henry," said the Hon. Seaton Delaval, advancing; "you look as if London work had been too much for you."

"I am not quite as well as I should like to be, Mr. Delaval, thank you," answered Sir Henry.

"Let us hope that a few good days with us will set you up," said Mr. Shorthouse, the Master.

"I am afraid I am beyond that," said Sir Henry, smiling in a peculiar way. "What are you going to draw, Mr. Shorthouse?"

"Well, Sir Henry, whatever you think proper. What do you say to beginning at Oak Grove, and then working down through the thin spinnies to Longwood? Then we shall be sure that we shall not leave a fox behind us."

"That will do," Sir Henry said, and they shortly all moved on.

The functions of the special attendant were now apparent. It was his business to open gates and make gaps for Sir Henry, and very well he understood his business, too. The row of bridle gates by Oak Grove and the spinnies had already been set open, but when hounds began to work Longwood the field was compelled to turn into the numerous rides which intersected it for fear of hounds breaking on the opposite side, when pursuit would have been hopeless, for Longwood was a very large covert, and unless you stuck to hounds you had not a chance. It was cut up into squares by a number of wattle fences, in all of which gates had been provided by the owner of the soil. Here the groom was invaluable, scampering along and holding the gate open till Sir Henry's party had gone through, when he would hand it to some farmer and gallop on to the next gate, so that Sir Henry never had to grope about with his hunting crop for a latch he was not able to see. Hounds were soon on their fox, but it was much easier to find a fox in Longwood than to get him away, and there were many scampers up and down the rides.

"How dare you speak to me, sir!"



before Reynard fairly faced the open. At last a cheery view halloo brought the huntsman to the edge of the wood towards Warborough, but Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox, Mr. Seaton Delaval, and young Paull were the first to cross the plough which surrounded the wood.

“This way, Sir Henry,” said various voices, all eager to help the popular old gentleman out of the wood. “This way,” and the faithful attendant crashed through the fence, making a handy gap for his master to follow—a gap not altogether unwelcome to the rest of the field.

Black Swan flew over the plough at a pace worthy of her high pedigree, but the light groom was at the far fence before her, and had found a good place to give Sir Henry a lead. In the next hedgerow hounds threw up, and Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox, always to the front, seized the opportunity of greeting the baronet.

“How are you, Sir Henry? Glad to see you out.”

“How dare you speak to me, sir?” said the baronet, flashing an angry glance from his blue eyes at the little man.

“What do you mean, Sir Henry?” asked the other, alarmed.

“Sir,” said Sir Henry, “I understand that you occupy some sort of situation with a scratch pack of dogs.”

“I do not understand you, Sir Henry.”

“I understand myself very well, sir. I believe that you and your master’s dogs and your rough riders come galloping over my land, and trampling over my farmers’ crops, and spoiling the hedges without asking, ‘with your leave or by your leave.’”

“I am afraid,” replied Snuffbox, “that I have the honour to be secretary to the Holborn Vale Staghounds, if that is what displeases you, Sir Henry?”

“Holborn Vale Staghounds, indeed,” snorted Sir Henry, “It is not a legitimate pack. You come down here, you bring a wretched calf or a pig, or a deer, as you choose to call it, by a van, and you turn him down and scamper after him without caring whether you spoil what my farmers have earned in the sweat of their brow, or who it belongs to. How dare you speak to me, sir?”

"We are always careful to get the farmer's leave first, and I thought, Sir Henry, that as you are a sportsman——"

"Sportsman, so I am, and proud of it, but I would blush to be seen with *your* pack. Do you call that sport? I can tell you that I don't. You had better not speak to me again. I wonder you are not ashamed to show your face with a respectable pack of hounds."

Almost a crowd had collected round while this dialogue was going on. There were one or two murmurs of "Well-done, Sir Henry, serve him right," but mostly from toadies. The majority, seemed secretly rather to sympathise with the secretary of the abused pack. There was no further time to give vent to their feelings, as the hounds picked up the scent again and tore away over the pastures towards High Oaks. There was a very pretty scamper of about a quarter of an hour when hounds again checked and continued to feather near an old quarry.

"Gone to earth in that hole," cried Sir Henry; but the huntsman shook his head and made a cast over to the right. The hounds could not own to anything, and after trying for some minutes, the Master recalled them by his horn, and Sir Henry exclaimed "The fox is in that hole, I tell you—I can smell him, he is close by."

So indeed it proved; the enthusiastic old sportsman was perfectly correct, for the terrier having been brought up the fox was soon driven out of his refuge, and went away again in full view of the field, but doubled back and retreated to Longwood. On the return, new ground was covered, and Colonel Manning having taken his cue, assisted Sir Henry's groom in making gaps and easing the way for the old gentleman. This gradually reconciled him to the Colonel's mismanagement of his favourite Black Swan, but it was long before Sir Henry recovered his wonted good humour, which had been rudely disturbed by Saintsbury Snuffbox.

"Confound that fellow," repeated he; "fancy his daring to speak to me, after the mischief those fellows have done. I should

like to catch them on my estate again. I would summon every one of them for trespass."

"I don't think you would, uncle," observed Diana; "you are always threatening people, but you seldom carry out the threats."

"By Jove, I will this time though," exclaimed her uncle, as they pulled up in one of the cross-roads in Longwood. "Here, Stokes!" as a farmer approached. "Remember, if any of these Holborn Vale chaps come across your fields, take their names and addresses, if they have got any."

"Yes, Sir Henry," replied Stokes, half smiling.

"And if they do any damage have a surveyor in next morning and value it. I will pay his guinea and will sue them for it."

"Yes, Sir Henry," said Stokes, humbly. He was shrewdly suspected of being the man who had given the Holborn Vale what they call a "turn out" on the last occasion.

"And if you give one of those chaps a sound thrashing I will see you through it, Stokes," the baronet went on.

"Thank you, Sir Henry," said Stokes, touching his hat.

"And mind, Stokes, tell your neighbours the same from me, mind, from *me*. I will have a circular sent round to all the tenants. But hark! they are on that fox again."

How it happened no one knows; but the fact was that somehow Sir Henry and Mr. Throgmorton Toms got back to the Hall at four o'clock in the afternoon, having unaccountably lost Colonel Mannerling and Diana.

The Colonel was a stranger to the country and hazy as to localities. When he arrived with the young lady two hours later, he explained their absence by describing the breaking away of a fresh fox with only a few hounds behind him—according to the Colonel's account no one else followed them except a couple of farmer boys, as he contemptuously termed them. Diana listened to the explanation with a somewhat heightened colour, and bolted to her room to change her dress before she could be asked inconvenient questions.

CHAPTER VII.

THE REV. C. T. MUDBURY DAWSON.



MUST now return to Miss Janet Nettlerash, who went on from the rectory to her friend, Mrs. Dawson's.

The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson had been educated at one of the modern colleges which have

during the past thirty years, sprung up in the northern counties of Great Britain—colleges which promise to give a young man what is termed university training at a fourth of the cost of Oxford or Cambridge. These institutions undoubtedly fulfil their promises as far as mere teaching is concerned; their professors are intelligent and learned men, and their *alumni* probably spend more time and devote more attention to real study than do the majority of undergraduates of the old universities. But that is all. In education as distinguished from instruction, these colleges are, unfortunately, too often lamentably deficient. They turn out some able scholars, but they fail in making a gentleman out of a raw cub. The great majority of Oxonians or Cantabs bring “down” with them a certain tone, a certain cultivation, and some little knowledge of the world. Few, indeed, of the scholars of these mushroom universities possess these qualities; scarcely one has

acquired them at the college, even if he does possess them. Too often the youths who leave the northern institution with the magic letters B.A. after their names, are just as ignorant, just as ill-mannered, and just as rough as they were when they went up ; and though they may frequently succeed in the career in life they have adopted, it is only because the rugged corners, which would have been smoothed down at Oxford or Cambridge, are knocked off still more roughly by open competition in the larger arena of Manchester, Liverpool, or London.

Many of these young men—in fact the majority—devote themselves to what are termed commercial pursuits ; others enter the medical profession, some develope into explorers of science and enthusiasts of literature. A very large contingent, however, become preachers and teachers in the ranks of various sects of Dissenters ; a very small number only entering the Established Church. For a young man who is going into the Church, to go to St. Andrews, or the Manchester University, would be justly considered a very exceptional proceeding. The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson was sent to one of these colleges from motives of economy, nor had his parents decided that he should devote his talents to the Church. But he felt a call to the pulpit during his undergraduate career, and was ordained after he had graduated and passed the necessary examinations. Some years having been spent in a curacy in a remote Lincolnshire village, where the eloquence which he thought that he possessed, and the readiness he undoubtedly possessed, were neither of them appreciated at their proper value, Mr. Dawson was able to secure the chaplaincy of one of our smaller and more distant colonial stations. Here his gifts attracted the attention and the admiration of the few female members of his congregation, and it was not long before he became a favourite with all the ladies in the place. Mr. Dawson was by no means anxious to marry, and preferred remaining the pet of all to becoming the exclusive property of one. But one lady—the eldest daughter of the chief official in the station—was so persistent in her siege and so patient under various rebuffs, that the chaplain at last led her to the hymeneal

altar. She was neither young nor pretty ; but she possessed a strong will, a ready tongue, a certain grace of manner, and undoubted ability. As long as her father remained in the station, the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson was looked up to and therefore fairly contented ; for although he lost some influence among the women, it was amply compensated by that which his wife gained for him among the men. But when Mr. Poole resigned his commissionership and a new Pharaoh came who knew not the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson nor his wife, things altered for the worse. Society at the station, so thought the chaplain, was becoming decidedly frivolous ; new arrivals were even heard to call the clergyman a bore and his wife a nuisance ; his eloquence failed to command attention, and her tea parties failed in attracting guests. Both felt that the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson should not waste the best years of his life and the power of his unrivalled mind, in a small and distant colony. They therefore started for England, reckoning on the influence of the ex-Commissioner and that of other colonists who had been lavish in their promises of help before leaving for the Old Country, to secure a good living for a man of the talents and virtues of the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson.

When they reached London, they found that they had been leaning on a broken reed. The ex-Commissioner had no influence at all, and their old colonial friends gave them the cold shoulder. Mr. Dawson, who had taken up elocution and English as his hobbies, was, after living on his father-in-law for many more months than the old gentleman liked, at last compelled to take the appointment of English master at a third-rate London school, stipulating only that he should be termed " Professor of Elocution and of the English Language." His wife, however, was far too ambitious to rest content with the miserable position they had obtained after so much time and trouble ; and after much thought she hit upon the notion of following, though *longo interrullo*, in the wake of Miss Helen Taylor and Miss Emily Faithfull. She decided upon giving lectures on woman's rights, and when her early attempts in this direction had met

with sufficient success to warrant a bolder flight, she included in her programme lectures against tobacco, against the Vaccination Act, and against another law needless to specify, but which is a favourite windmill for the less enlightened and less modest of strong-minded women to tilt at.

Mrs. Dawson's mode of proceeding was simple and effective. She had no difficulty in discovering the headquarters and managers of the various leagues which took her subjects under their especial protection. She placed herself at the disposal of these enthusiastic persons and, in the first instance, offered to deliver addresses in London without any remuneration. Imposing in her appearance, gifted with remarkable powers of persuasion, and being willing to follow her patrons to any length of absurdity, Mrs. Dawson had no difficulty in obtaining the privilege she asked for, and she did not neglect the opportunity of increasing her circle of acquaintance and introducing those of her hearers who would consent, to her gifted husband. She felt sure of herself and was therefore not in the least nervous even when speaking for the first time before an extremely excited audience in the north of London. She had had some little experience of the women of the less educated classes and was able to prepare a lecture and to deliver it in a manner which struck home. Her first attempt was in the cause of small pox as against vaccination, and the graphic strength with which she dwelt on the horrible complaints transmitted through the vaccine lymph sent a succession of shudders through her audience. Figures, compounded from statistics of doubtful authenticity, were handled in so masterly a manner that they all told against vaccination ; yet she had been careful that none of them was open to an impromptu attack, and had provided herself with a goodly array of authorities for all her statements. In fact, she had "coached" the subject up thoroughly, and brought one side of the question into the most vivid light. When, after the audience had listened with almost unremitting attention for upwards of an hour, Mrs. Dawson retired from the platform, enthusiastic applause testified that the Anti-Vaccination League

had gained a powerful weapon, and numerous ladies stepped forward to enlist her services for a future occasion. The male members of the committee soon heard of the new lecturer, and it was felt that Mrs. Dawson might be just as useful in addressing a mixed meeting as she had been with one confined to her own sex. Eager demands were made on her time, but she was perfectly honest with her patrons in this respect, that she at once declared her inability to lecture in future unless paid for it: "I am a poor struggling professor's wife," said she, "and I can't afford to do it for nothing. But," she adds, "I believe so fully in the Truth of THE CAUSE, that I shall ask only a nominal remuneration." Mrs. Dawson rapidly obtained a remuneration which was soon more than nominal, and six months after the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson had been appointed Professor of the English Language and Elocution at the "North Central Collegiate Institute," his wife was acknowledged to be one of the best of the female speakers for Women's Rights, against Compulsory Vaccination, and on behalf of the Anti-Tobacco League. Mr. Dawson had every reason to congratulate himself, as his income was more than doubled by the lady's eloquence. She was not, however, by any means satisfied. She took every opportunity of thrusting forward her husband and introducing him to the members of her various leagues as a man of genius, to whom the opportunity of proving it had been denied by an envious fate and false friends. She induced Mr. Dawson to agree to take private pupils, if he could get them; and she endeavoured to persuade her friends to send their husbands, brothers, and sons to take lessons in the English Language and Elocution from her husband. In this endeavour she was only partially successful; and, looking about for another mode of increasing their means, it struck her that if she could lecture, Mr. Dawson could do so *à fortiori*, as he had preached once every Sunday almost continuously for twenty years. At any rate, nothing could be lost by trying; and the couple at once began preparing a lecture on "The English Language." She watched her chance, and had not to wait long before she was able to induce some of her anti-

tobacco and anti-vaccination friends to form a committee for the purpose of patronising the Rev. Mr. Dawson and introducing him to the public. There are men and women to whom the attraction of being on a committee at all is considerable ; if they are also called “Patrons,” and are seated on a platform while some one lectures to the *oi πολλοί* below, they are perfectly happy, and consider they have achieved greatness. To obtain such a position, several ladies and gentlemen of Canonbury and the neighbourhood were willing to guarantee the cost of hiring a hall, and of the printer’s charge for five hundred large bills, on which the Rev. Lecturer’s numerous christian names were printed at full length and in large capitals. Mrs. Dawson, however, did more than merely obtain patrons and guarantors. She wrote the greater portion of the lecture herself, and as she “knew her public” better than her husband, she was careful to spic it with a number of venerable jokes. In fact, to tell the truth, she first put down all the good stories and jokes she could remember or discover, and then connected those she considered most appropriate by a mortar composed of paraphrases of Dr. Angus’s and Dean Trench’s book. Mrs. Dawson felt that while the function of a large, deep-voiced woman like herself was, above all, to be earnest, her husband could well afford to be funny, and being in holy orders, was likely to become a greater celebrity if he were facetious than if he had been serious like most of his cloth. The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson’s appearance lent itself well to the character his wife had selected for him. He was very thin, and of medium height ; his long foreign sojourn had deprived him of any colour his complexion might once have possessed, and had reduced his skin to one uniform dull yellow. His long face was made to look still longer, because his forehead continued to the back of his head, the reverend gentleman having lost all his hair except a small grisly fringe from the one ear to the other. His chin and lips were closely shaven, but he preserved a collar of gray stubble round his neck, which made him resemble an old baboon. And the resemblance was heightened by the size of his mouth, which

had probably been stretched to its present huge limits by the constant practice of his favourite elocution ; the rowing man's arms increase, and the muscles stand out like whipecord : the legs of the Alpine climber acquire strength and size ; in a similar way, no doubt, constant speaking and shouting had enlarged Mr. Dawson's mouth. His nose was small, and perfectly hemispherical : you could not speak of the tip of the elocutionist's nose, because it had not a tip ; if continuity of curvature be an element of beauty, it was the most lovely nose in creation. His eyes were round and large, but concealed by spectacles ; on occasions, however, he removed his glasses and glared round with much effect.

The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson rehearsed his first lecture several times before Mrs. Dawson was quite satisfied. She instructed him to take off his spectacles and roll his eyes wildly whenever he came to a funny story, and as he had not got a particularly good memory, nor much sense of humour, this part of the performance was not easy to acquire. With so good an instructor, and under the distinguished patronage of the Canonbury grocers and their ladies, the lecture could not fail to be a success, and it was not long before the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson undertook to repeat the address in another suburb, without asking his friends to guarantee anything. For Mrs. Dawson had the qualities which make great generals and great financiers —boldness and self-confidence. She knew when to strike, and struck hard. As the *Pentonville Advertiser* noticed her husband's lecture, and as several hundred sixpences were taken at the doors, she determined in future that the hire of the hall and all expenses should be found by herself alone, and that patrons should only be asked to lend their names, and to attend on the platform. Soon this courageous policy bore silver, if not golden fruit, and Mr. Dawson, who was extremely fond of a good dinner, was gratified by the appearance on his table of delicacies of which he had for years been deprived. Strengthened by these and an occasional glass of fruity port, which his wife doled out to him, he began to extend "The English Language," and

another lecture called “The Power of Speech,” into regions which had hitherto been plunged in ignorance of both subjects. The stock-in-trade of the worthy and gifted couple was sufficient to afford amusement and instruction to the inhabitants of the suburbs on the North and East of London, and Mrs. Dawson felt that she would be able to renew that stock when exhaustion was imminent.

No such contingency, however, had arisen at the period when Mrs. Dawson was sent by the Anti-Tobacco League to address the ladies of Silverstone in the Mechanics’ Institute of that flourishing and increasing town—one of the many within fifteen miles of London, which have, within the last few decades, grown to twenty and fifty-fold their previous size. Miss Janet Nettlerash, who inhabited a pretty house with a large garden about a mile from Silverstone, in a part of the country not yet altogether covered by suburban villas, was attracted by the huge posters which decorated every available hoarding and blank wall in the neighbourhood. Miss Nettlerash had very strong feelings about tobacco: the smell of a cigar offended her, and the fumes of a pipe made her sick. The Virginian weed was not used in her greenhouses, for, said she, it affected the flavour of her grapes. No smoker was ever wittingly invited to her house. The subject of the lecture was, therefore most interesting to the spinster, and her interest was increased by the circumstance that the lecturer was a lady. Miss Nettlerash at once applied to the local stationer for a ticket, and he, aware of the social status of his customer, suggested that she must take a seat on the platform, the body of the hall being intended for what he, as much to gratify the tradesman’s inordinate dislike of the class of mechanics as to please his client, chose to call “quite common people.” Mr. Treddles had not only undertaken the sale of tickets on commission, but had also placed his services and his local knowledge at the disposal of Mrs. Dawson, for a consideration. It was he who suggested the persons on whom the clergyman’s wife should call to ask for their patronage; and on him devolved the arrangement of seats and of procedure. When the

time arrived, therefore, Miss Nettlerash found herself placed in a comfortable chair in the first row of the platform, slightly to the right of, but close to, the small table reserved for the lecturer. Precisely at eight o'clock Mrs. Dawson appeared, gracefully leaning on the arm of her husband, whose slender frame was almost eclipsed by her Juno-like proportions. Mrs. Dawson had gained flesh since she had returned to England; she was now a majestic woman with a voluminous bosom and powerful limbs. Her dress was of rustling brown silk, trimmed with yellow, and falling over a *jupe* of a lighter shade; it displayed the fine proportions of her arms from the shoulder to the point where ten-buttoned gloves encircled them. Round her portly neck were heavy links of real or Abyssinian gold; her head was decorated with a combination of yellow ribbons and black lace, which would have made a smaller woman look ridiculous, but scarcely clashed with her grey hair, which was dressed in bands over her ears. Mrs. Dawson had small but piercing black eyes, eyebrows which were still many shades darker than her hair, and gave her a weird expression; a strong aquiline nose, a mouth too large and lips too thin for beauty, but not objectionable in outline; a projecting chin, and a complexion carefully arranged so that the ravages of time should not be too apparent.

After a graceful salute to the audience in return for the usual formal applause, Mrs. Dawson opened her lecture by taking her hearers into her confidence. Her curiosity had some time ago been roused, said she, by the number of tobacconists she had noticed in the streets. Having been abroad in the colonies for many years she had only made this observation recently, but once made, she followed up the trail, and discovered that there were as many shops for the sale of tobacco as there were public-houses, and that smoking absorbed almost as much money as drinking. There were twice as many tobacconists in London, Mrs. Dawson declared, as there were bakers; three times as many cigar shops as boot shops; six times as many as clothiers. The deductions were obvious. People spent twice as much on tobacco as they did on bread, the staff of life; three times as

much as they did on boots, six times the amount they expended in clothes. And all this money was spent, said the lecturer, in a filthy habit which could not under any possible circumstances do any good whatever, which satisfied neither hunger nor thirst, which neither kept out heat nor cold, which was not only useless to assist in prolonging life, but was a slow but sure means of destroying it. The vice of smoking was unnatural, nay more, it was positively poisonous. Mrs. Dawson then went on to give statistics carefully compiled for the purpose, and quoted all the medical opinions she had been able to obtain from the doctors who wage war against tobacco. Then followed a graphic picture of the more immediate results of smoking ; the stifling, impure atmosphere of the cottage parlour, the cough of the wife, the sneeze of the children ; the noxious odour emanating from the smoker, from his clothes, and from everything with which he comes in contact ; the sums wasted on the vile weed by the father, while the poor mother was obliged to stint her children in food, or to allow them to run about in rags ; the diseases which followed on the money intended for boots having gone in buying cavendish ; the lingering illness, death, and funeral. Having enlarged on the points which we have only indicated, Mrs. Dawson then contrasted the habits and home of the virtuous non-smoker with the previous pictures, and showed that he who abstained from tobacco would ensure health here below and perpetual bliss hereafter. This theorem was scarcely enunciated thus broadly, but the whole drift of the discourse tended to prove the intimate connection between abstention from tobacco and salvation of souls. After a little more than an hour had thus been spent, the scenes of horr^r depicted in a deep voice, those of sorrow in a sad, low tone, and the joyful home of the non-smoker described with cheerful, high notes, Mrs. Dawson stopped, and then suddenly pointing to an unfortunate young man of sallow appearance who was leaning against the wall in a listless attitude at the further end of the room, she cried in loud tones, “ You need not look far to witness the dreadful results of this noxious weed. There, there, just behind you, is a young man whose countenance

betrays his prevailing vice." All looked round, following the speaker's outstretched finger. "See his pale face, his sunken eyes, ay, and his trembling knees! Watch him, as he stands there, while the certainty of premature death is casting its gloom over his worn features." And indeed, the miserable object of the lady's wrath had almost collapsed under her words and the gaze of the whole audience. She went on: "See how his jaw falls and his teeth begin to chatter. It is incipient paralysis! Look at him. He is but twenty; all his life would have been before him, a sunny path of flowers: but he turned aside and smoked, and now he is being hurried on to his grave, which is already open to receive him. The demon Tobacco has fastened his claws in that young man's body, he will not relax the fatal grip. God have mercy upon you; turn, while it is yet time!"

With these words the orator disappeared; she made no bow, but left her audience under the full impression of her peroration. The young man was carried out fainting. He had never smoked but once in his life, and then it had made him sick; but this was unknown to the rest of the public, who credited Mrs. Dawson with almost supernatural power. The grand people on the platform meanwhile slowly filed out through the private room, where the lecturer was resting in an arm-chair, and refreshing herself with iced water.



CHAPTER VIII.

FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS.



NETTLERASH was very much struck by Mrs. Dawson's lecture, and at once became her most enthusiastic disciple. The elderly maiden laid it down as a principle that all her pursuits must have some higher object, generally one connected with the benefit of the human race. Abandoning her last favourite medical fancy to take care of itself, she at

once joined in Mrs. Dawson's crusade against tobacco and alcohol. The Silverton evening gained for the fair lecturer a staunch friend and supporter. To Miss Nettlerash — who, notwithstanding all her foibles, was too sensible to think that women ought to remain unmarried in order to do good — the lecturer at once appeared as the ideal woman. Nor was Mrs. Dawson's conversation at all of a nature to destroy this illusion. She was something of a diplomatist as well as an orator, and the few remarks she made in answer to Miss Nettlerash's polite and genuine speeches of congratulation on her success quite confirmed that lady's opinion. Soon they became fast friends. Miss Nettlerash attended a lecture of the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson's "On the

English Language," and then another on "Elegance of Style and Elocution." She was equally fascinated by both, for the poor lady had not read Trench's little books, and was not aware that the first lecture was nothing but a condensation of the two best known of these useful volumes, while the second was compounded from "Chambers's Pronouncing Dictionary," and a few anecdotes cut out of sundry provincial papers, the whole connected by some prose of Mrs. Dawson's. Miss Nettlerash, who was always in a fit of adoration before some one person or another, now fell prone at the feet of Mr. and Mrs. Mudbury Dawson, who appeared to her nothing short of regenerators of the human race. She soon discovered that the worthy couple were not in the most affluent circumstances. She visited them at their lodgings in the north of London, and when their little daughter became ailing she offered to take her for a few weeks to her nice place near Silverton, so that the child might enjoy fresh country air, and have a run in the garden and orchard. Of course the clergyman and his wife were delighted with the suggestion, and somehow it happened that little Marian Dawson remained at Silverton. Miss Nettlerash really grew fond of the child, and the dingy lodgings of her parents, with the inferior cooking and attendance, were not such as conduced to the health of a young girl constitutionally rather delicate. Nor did the frequent absences of Mr. and Mrs. Dawson permit that regularity of instruction, of meals, and of leisure hours which is indispensable to the proper education of children. Some short time therefore before Miss Nettlerash's visit to her sister at Warborough little Marian Dawson had been formally and permanently installed at Silverton. A governess was engaged for her, and a French master came down from London twice a week to give her lessons. Every now and then the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson made a casual call, when he would kiss his child on the forehead and say, "Glad to see you looking so well, my dear. You should be much obliged to Miss Nettlerash," and then depart without further enquiry as to her studies or other pursuits. Mrs. Dawson was very glad to be relieved from the dilemma of dragging a girl of fifteen about with her when she "starred" the provinces, or

of leaving her at home to the care of lodging-house servants. Marian was an intelligent and good-tempered child. The arrangement was of advantage to all, for even Miss Nettlerash found the companionship of the girl pleasant and soothing after exciting hours spent in debating delicate subjects at public meetings or in fighting with her still unconverted sisters.

After leaving Warborough Miss Nettlerash joined her friends at Saintsbury, a country town about twenty miles further on, where a lecture was delivered in the afternoon by Mrs. Dawson, against the use of strong drink, and in the evening by the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson on "The Pronunciation of the English Language." Miss Nettlerash considered it a matter of friendship, of duty, and of pleasure to travel with the two lecturers as much and as often as she could. It is true that she had heard the lecture against tobacco some thirty times, and that against alcohol thirty-five. It is also true that she knew the discourse on the English language nearly by heart, and that the oration on elocution was almost equally familiar to her. Yet she never wearied of occupying a conspicuous place on the platform, nor was her presence at all unpleasant to our two friends. For it must be admitted that on these occasions the purse of the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson was seldom drawn upon. Miss Nettlerash was in the habit of engaging a sitting-room for herself at the best hotel, and this sitting-room became the parlour of the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson and his wife.

After the evening lecture at Saintsbury Miss Nettlerash and her friend sat down at the fire in the old-fashioned room at the "George Hotel." They ordered tea and began chatting, it being understood that after his exertions the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson required something more substantial than merely tea, and would be taking supper in the coffee-room.

"How wonderfully good Mr. Dawson was to-night," said Miss Nettlerash.

"Do you think so, my dear?" asked Mrs. Dawson, hardly suppressing a yawn. "I thought he was much the same as usual."

"Indeed he was still better than usual, if possible," exclaimed

Miss Nettlerash. "Why, he introduced a lot of new matter into his discourse."

"Indeed?" asked Mrs. Dawson, languidly.

"Of course he did, my dear," continued Miss Nettlerash. "That remark about the common people always pronouneing *dog* 'dawg' was something quite new. It has never struck me before, but it is perfectly true, is it not?"

"I think it is," answered Mrs. Dawson.

"Of course," continued the maiden lady. "And what he said about cockneys was so clever, so true to life. They don't say *cab*, they say 'keb'; and how beautifully he put it! He is a splendid imitator, and yet he talks such lovely English himself, does he not?"

"I suppose so," assented Mrs. Dawson.

"And so do you, my dear," Miss Nettlerash continued, enthusiastically. "Oh, what bliss it must be to be married to such a man as Mr. Dawson. Do you not feel a happy woman?"

"I suppose I do," answered Mrs. Dawson, concealing another yawn behind her hand. "Have some more tea."

"Thank you. But of course I don't mean that you don't deserve it. You of all women most deserve to have so admirable a husband."

"I am glad you think so," said Mrs. Dawson.

"Of course you do, dear! You are admirably matched, are you not? Your life must be one continued harmony."

Mrs. Dawson looked as if she were not quite sure about the continued harmony, but did not contradict her patroness.

"A woman like yourself—full of energy, brains, and anxiety to do good," continued Miss Nettlerash, "is far above the prejudices of the weak vessels who call themselves women. Such a woman should be, as she is, united to a man who is the only man I have ever known without any vices at all. A man of great learning and brilliancy," continued Miss Nettlerash, warming to her subject; "clever, accomplished, an orator who neither smokes nor drinks——"

At this moment the door opened, and a form somewhat uncertain in its movements strove to enter the room.

"Old 'ooman gone to bed yet?" asked a thick voice.

Mrs. Dawson jumped up hastily, while a curious odour compounded of spirits and tobacco suddenly pervaded the apartment.

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Dawson, seizing her husband and hustling him out of the room. "Hush! go to bed." She bundled him out, pushed him along the passage, and locked him into their bed-room. The interruption was brief, and in a minute Mrs. Dawson was again on her chair by the fire.

"Poor man," she said to Miss Nettlerash, "he is quite overcome by the heat of the room, the smell of the gas, and his own exertions. That sometimes happens after these lectures. I have to see him to bed and give him a little reviving draught. I shall go and look after him directly."

"Poor Mr. Dawson!" exclaimed Miss Nettlerash sympathisingly. "I am afraid he is working too hard, but you should consult a doctor."

Mrs. Dawson smiled somewhat grimly. "We have already done so, and the doctor prescribed the draught I mention."

"Is not there a curious smell 'in the room?" asked Miss Nettlerash suddenly. "It is like tobacco. I noticed it when Mr. Dawson opened the door just now. I could not quite make out what he said, for his voice seemed quite confused somehow. I wonder where that smell comes from."

"From the hall, no doubt," Mrs. Dawson said. "Those country bumpkins have been smoking all over the place, you know, and of course when Mr. Dawson opened the door he let the smell in. Yes," she continued, as if reflectively, "poor Mr. Dawson! he often loses his voice after these lectures."

Miss Nettlerash smiled at a conceit which struck her at that moment. "He talked as if he were tipsy, my dear," she exclaimed. "Is it not funny?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Dawson, anxious to turn the conversation. "It is the effect of the gas and the exertion. By-the-bye, have you heard anything lately of your precious connection Miss Diana Branscombe?"

CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE PRIVATE GOSSIP.

Now Miss Nettlerash was as fond of gossiping about her relations and friends as any maiden lady, less strong-minded, could be. She knew the ages of her whole family from the eldest to the youngest, with their respective birthdays, and she had an unpleasant habit of discussing these ages in general company. Her memory was a complete encyclopaedia of all events which even remotely affected the members of the Branscombe family, into which her sister had married, or her own. A sporting man would have backed Miss Nettlerash against any number of family Bibles and would have won his money. Upon the delinquencies of her "sisters, her cousins, and her aunts," she was particularly hard, and Mrs. Dawson well knew that in enquiring about Miss Diana Branscombe she was opening a most congenial topic.

"My dear Eliza," said Miss Nettlerash, lifting up her hands, "the way that girl goes on is perfectly awful."

"Anything new then?" asked Mrs. Dawson.

"There is no occasion for anything new," replied Miss Nettlerash. "Her doings for the last three years have been the talk of London and Bankshire, and she has not improved a bit."

"I never quite know," said Mrs. Dawson enquiringly, "what she really does. I know that she is rather a fast young person, and that is all."

"Fast, Eliza!" echoed Miss Nettlerash. "I call it perfectly horrid. In my time nobody would have visited a girl that flirted in that way. Why last season she was about the whole summer with some Italian adventurer—Count he called himself. If I went to the theatre, which was not often, I used to see her in a box with that Count. When I drove to call on dear Mrs. Smith at Richmond I saw her on the top of a four-horse coach—drags

they call them, I think—with that black man. If I ever strayed into the Park, which did not happen more than once or twice in the season, I was sure to see her riding with him. And I hear that her goings on with him at balls and things were perfectly dreadful."

"Did he propose to her?" asked Mrs. Dawson.

"I don't know, I am sure. At any rate if they had been engaged they could not have been more together than they were. I daresay the man had a wife and seven yellow children somewhere in the wilds of Italy. How Sir Henry ever could have been so blind I cannot understand, and he does not seem to be a bit better now."

"Do you mean to say that he allows all this?"

"Allows it! Why he actually encourages it. Would you believe, Eliza, he asked that Count down to Branscombe Hall, and Diana actually gave him riding lessons?"

"Riding lessons?"

"Yes," said Miss Nettlerash, who was quite devoid of humour. "Ralph told me. It seems that the man had never got on a horse in his life—could not afford it, I suppose—and Diana made him ride one of her hunters all round a grass plot at the Hall—what she calls her ring—and she stood in the middle with a whip, just like the men do at the circus, and cracked the whip until the horse galloped, and then the foreign Count fell off."

"That was rather clever," remarked Mrs. Dawson.

"Well, at any rate there was one good thing," continued Miss Nettlerash. "The Count left the Hall, they say, because he could not bear having to tumble off the horse every day, even to please Diana. That was the end of the Count. But she had gone on with him to such an extent that everybody says they ought to have been married."

"And since then?" asked Mrs. Dawson.

"And since then I hear she has taken up somebody else—an officer in the Guards or something of that sort, one of those great, tall swaggerers, who smoke and drink and swear; and that

fool, Sir Henry, has asked him down to the Hall as well. They are always about together."

" You don't say so," Mrs. Dawson remarked.

" It is a fact, my dear. I call it wicked, positively wicked, of Sir Henry. He is taking charge of the girl and has brought her up, and he has no right to imperil her interests in this world and the next in the manner he does. No respectable man will marry that girl after all these goings on."

" But after all," ventured the clergyman's wife, " her flirtations may be perfectly harmless."

" Harmless, my dear!" repeated the indignant maiden, with some shrewdness. " How would a respectable city merchant, for instance, like to marry a girl whose name has been coupled with a dozen different men during the last few years? What chance has he of domestic happiness, such as you enjoy for instance, darling?" affectionately taking Mrs. Dawson's hand.

" Oh, don't talk of my happiness," said the latter wearily. " I have hard work to keep going, notwithstanding your kindness."

" Never mention that," Miss Nettlerash said. " I am glad to be of some little use to two people like yourselves who are doing so much for humanity. But what good does a girl like Diana do? She gets into mischief, and leads men into mischief, and her foolish uncle looks on with his eyes shut. She was hidden away somewhere for six weeks last year, and no one knows why she went or what she did. People said all sorts of things about it. Sir Henry would not tell anyone where she was, and made matters worse. I am perfectly sick of it."

" I hope that nothing worse will happen," said Mrs. Dawson.

" So do I," agreed Miss Nettlerash; " but I am very much afraid. I would not have her as my niece at any price. God forbid!"

" There is not much chance of that," remarked Mrs. Dawson.

" No, I am thankful to say there is not," assented Miss Nettlerash.

" I must look after my invalid," said Mrs. Dawson, rising.

" Good night, dear; I hope Mr. Dawson will be quite well in

the morning," Miss Nettlerash said, tenderly embracing her friend. "Good night, dear Eliza."

Mrs. Dawson was up long before her spouse—in fact, she was dressed and ready for work before he opened his eyes. She proceeded to wake him, a matter of no small difficulty. When she at last succeeded, the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson rubbed his eyes, and then laid his hand on his forehead.

"I don't feel very well," he murmured. "I think I had better stay in bed to-day, Eliza."

"Stay in bed!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "Wretched man! you have got to lecture at Pedlington at seven o'clock, and we have to travel fifty miles before then. Alexander," she continued solemnly, as the orator sat up in bed, making a ghastly figure with his sallow cheeks and sunken eyes, "you got disgracefully tipsy last night."

"I did not," feebly answered the clergyman.

"You did," continued Mrs. Dawson. "You were horribly and disgracefully drunk. You almost spoiled the whole thing, staggering into the room as you did."

"I am sure I did not," repeated Mr. Dawson.

"Alexander," she said again, "you talk nonsense. What did you take downstairs?"

"I only had one brandy and soda."

"Stuff!" said the lady. "You had better tell, because I shall send for the bill. I shall soon find out then what you took. A nice man you are to be the husband of a woman who works herself to death preaching abstinence from alcohol and tobacco."

"They are good things in moderation," murmured the reverend gentleman.

"Perhaps they are," continued Mrs. Dawson. "But you don't use them in moderation. You get drunk the moment you are out of my sight. You will disgrace us yet, and bring ruin on the whole family. I often feel inclined to leave you to your own nasty, vulgar courses, and to go and lecture on my own account. I should only have one to keep then, at any rate."

"Well," expostulated Mr. Dawson, "the old woman pretty well keeps us as it is."

"Pretty well keeps us!" echoed his wife, sarcastically "She does not pay for your coats and waistcoats, and hats and white ties, nor for your brandy and soda and filthy cigars, does she?"

"And she does not pay for your dresses and bonnets, I suppose?" retorted the reverend gentleman. "I have to work hard for them, and a good many other things as well."

"And I should like to know whether she would pay for our railway journeys and hotel bills if it were not for your wife, Alexander."

"He, he!" giggled the Rev. Mr. Dawson, weakly. "I don't know that. I rather think she likes me."

The lady turned upon him furiously. "Oh, she likes you, you conceited, ugly, drunken wretch! You think she likes you? Very well, we will see. Alexander," she said, solemnly, "I shall now pack up my things and leave you. You may shift for yourself at Pedlington and Upton Major, and wherever you want to lecture. I shall have nothing more to do with it, nor with you. From this hour we are separated." And with these words Mrs. Dawson proceeded to open a trunk, out of which she cast forth every article which belonged to male attire. "There," she said, "there are your things. Pack them up or leave them alone. Do what you please with them. I shall go away by the ten o'clock train with Miss Nettlerash. But I shall not prevent your making love to her if you like."

There was a thorough business-like air about Mrs. Dawson while she proceeded to prepare her things for departure. She went about the room with compressed lips and a frowning brow, taking no further notice of her husband.

"Don't, Eliza," at last murmured the reverend gentleman from the bed. "Get me a bottle of soda water, please, and I think I could eat a red herring for breakfast."

"You may ring the bell and ask for whatever you please, and pay for it too," answered Mrs. Dawson. "I will have nothing more to do with you."

"Oh, please don't, Eliza," repeated the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson. "It was only a little joke of mine. I could not do without you, indeed; you know I could not."

"You wretch," Mrs. Dawson exclaimed, turning round to him again; "you cowardly wretch! How dare you insult your wife's feelings in this way? You know you could not go on with your work a week without me."

"I know I could not," Mr. Dawson assented feebly.

"How much did you drink last night, you tipsy brute?" she asked.

"Upon my honour, only two brandies and sodas."

"Now, if you don't tell the truth I shall leave you to yourself. Good bye!" and Mrs. Dawson approached the door.

"Eliza, dear," her husband cried, piteously, "do stop; don't go away and leave your poor Alexander all alone. I will tell you all about it, and I won't get screwed again. I thought a pint of champagne would do me good after all that lecturing, so I just had a little with my supper."

"How many pints?" inquired Mrs. Dawson, sternly.

"Only one," asseverated Mr. Dawson, "and you know it was not robbing Marian, because the old woman will pay for it."

"The old woman pay for it, indeed!" sneered the lady. "Why, she believes you never touch intoxicating liquors."

"Oh, I told them to put it down as turtle soup," Mr. Dawson answered. "It is all right."

"Sneak!" was all he got for his ruse. "And what else did you have?"

"What else did I have? Well, just a glass of port wine to settle it. And those two brandies and sodas settled *me*, I suppose."

"A glass of port wine?" and again Mrs. Dawson looked at him sternly. "How many glasses, I should like to know?"

"Well, a glass or two, my dear," said Mr. Dawson, writhing under the cross-examination.

"Well," Mrs. Dawson said, "I will give you one more chance, and it is more than you deserve. Here is a penniless man who has

to be kept by his wife by the sweat of her brow, wasting his substance and his health in champagne and port wine and brandy. It is too disgraceful. I warn you, Alexander, if it happens once more there will be an end to all this. Now get up, and make haste to dress. I will bring you some soda water, just to give you a fillip."

Mrs. Dawson was as good as her word, for she brought the soda water, and added to it a little of something stronger out of a flask she generally travelled with.

Mr. Dawson was soon made presentable, and appeared humbly at his wife's side at the breakfast table in Miss Nettlerash's comfortable sitting-room.



CHAPTER X.

THE ELDORADO GOLD COMPANY (LIMITED).



IT WAS not long before the two hundred pounds which Mr. Throgmorton Toms had lent Ralph Branscombe were exhausted. Small sums on account did, indeed, pacify the most rapacious of his creditors for the moment; but they were

not a complete cure of his sufferings. Very soon the disease appeared in a form equally aggravated and equally painful. Messrs. Brown, Holland, & Co., the great East India firm, in whose office Ralph occupied what would fifty years ago have been called a stool, but what was in fact a comfortable arm-chair, were by no means hard task-masters. When Ralph entered the City on leaving college it had been understood that he was doing so with a view of acquiring business habits, and not necessarily with the object of making a livelihood. Brown, Holland, & Co. were old friends of Sir Henry Branscombe's, and the East India merchants were glad to oblige the wealthy and influential baronet by giving his nephew a berth on a "nominal" salary. The firm did not, therefore, expect from Ralph the same methodical ways nor the same regularity of attendance which was exacted from the other persons employed by them. Frequent holidays for

hunting in the winter, for cricket or boat races in the summer, were asked for and granted as a matter of course, and the pleasant ways of young Brancombe had carried off these privileges without much envy from the other occupants of the office. But though Messrs. Brown, Holland, & Co. were indulgent they were not lax. When Ralph had not obtained leave he was expected to be at his place at ten precisely, and not to go till his work was finished. On mail evening he was frequently detained far beyond his ordinary dinner hour, for Ralph was a good and facile penman, and his assistance was then very useful. Nor did he object to this work; nay, rather did he enjoy it; and while the mere clerks always hated the approach of the weekly Friday, Ralph looked forward to that evening as an occasion for exercising his energies to the utmost—almost as he might look forward to a four-mile steeple-chase—with some little trepidation, but no small pleasure. When the last bundle of letters was finished just in time to catch the mail train at Cannon Street, Ralph generally ran off with it himself, and in sauntering on to his club afterwards would often recapitulate the manner in which he had dealt with old Rumjansée's extortionate demand, or settled that delicate matter about the general average of the "Samoy's" cargo. And Brown, Holland, & Co. were well aware that they had acquired in Ralph an extremely valuable correspondent—a man who would quickly, almost intuitively, grasp the drifts of their wishes and work them out on paper with a rapidity and an ease of language of which the old gentlemen themselves would not have been capable. Yet Brown, Holland, & Co., as our hero well knew, would stand no nonsense. If they had suspected the condition of his finances his shrift would have been short indeed, though he might be ten times Sir Henry's nephew. No bailiff should ever enter *their* ponderous mahogany doors, nor should any writ be served on *their* premises.

Ralph was so conscious of the result if anything leaked out, and so sure that disgrace with Brown, Holland, & Co. would

be swiftly followed by disgrace with his uncle, that his anxiety grew overwhelming, and he called on Mr. Throgmorton Toms at his office near the Bank of England to inform him that there must be no further delay in settling his liabilities, as otherwise a crash must come. He would, therefore, go to Branscombe on the following Saturday and make a clean breast of it to his uncle, *coûte que coûte*.

Our city friend in vain urged Ralph to postpone his visit on the score of Sir Henry's health. "I am very sorry," he answered; "but from what my father writes, I think my uncle is much better, and this matter is not likely to do him any harm. At any rate, unless I am able to settle my debts, he is sure to hear of them very soon in a much more unpleasant manner, and will be more seriously upset by the sudden news that I have been bundled out of the office and am made a bankrupt, than he would be by my telling him quietly that I want a thousand." Mr. Toms, finding persuasion impossible, at last said :

"Well, Ralph, I told you I would do something for you, and I have been looking out. What I thought of is not quite ready, and I should have preferred waiting a week or two, but I will endeavour to hurry matters. Come and see me on Tuesday at two, and don't do anything till then."

Ralph gave this assurance, wondering what Mr. Toms could have found to extricate him from his difficulties, and returned on the Tuesday. "Mr. Toms," said the clerk, "is at the Gold Company. Will you step over with me?"

Our hero followed the young man, who led him across the street into one of those palatial buildings which are gradually replacing the old shabby, black houses in which city men of olden times used to transact their business. The heavy glazed doors swung back noiselessly, and they ascended a handsome staircase to the first floor, where another pair of still more magnificent doors bore, on a large brass plate, the words :

ELDORADO GOLD COMPANY (LIMITED).

The clerk pushed into a fine, lofty apartment, cut up in half-glazed partitions, and called out: "Gentleman for Mr. Toms."

"Mr. Toms is engaged," answered someone.

"He ain't engaged for this gentleman," replied the clerk, and then whispered to a pert young man who put his head out of one of the pigeon holes in the partition.

"All right, wait 'arf a minnitt," said the pert young man.

There was some whistling up a tube, and some growling through it like the gobbling of turkeys, and then the pert young man came out, and obsequiously holding open a door, beckoned Ralph through.

"Mr. Toms is waiting for you in the Board-room, sir."

The Board-room was spacious, lofty, well lighted, and handsomely decorated. It was furnished with a substantial table covered with green cloth, round which were placed eight most attractive arm chairs, of which the one at the head was a little larger than the rest. At a smaller table, covered with papers, sat Mr. Throgmorton Toms, giving orders to a couple of clerks.

He waved his hand to them as majestically as he could.

"That will do, Simpkins. You may go, Wrightson. Now, Ralph, sit down. First of all, I must tell you that if you expect to get on in the City you must be able to hold your tongue."

"Of course," assented Ralph.

"Yes, you say 'of course,'" continued Mr. Throgmorton Toms, "but you must remember that half the good things in this world are spoilt because people talk about them. If you make money, keep it to yourself, Ralph, and don't tell anyone *how* you make it. There are plenty of folks anxious to find out the right way, and they will always come and feed at your trough if you'd let them. Just don't tell them where your trough is," added the vulgar little man.

"I won't," answered Ralph, rather disgusted.

"That is not enough for me in this matter," Mr. Toms went on; "I want to do you a service, because I wish to save poor Sir Henry any anxiety, and because I'd like to see you get on. But unless I can reckon on your discretion I can do nothing for you."

"What am I to be silent about?" asked Ralph.

"Everything," replied the City man. "This Company, the offices, myself, *yourself*; it is no one's business but our own, and you have no occasion to say you have been here. Will you give me your word of honour that anything I tell you or show you, anything you may see or hear, will be a sacred secret to you?"

Ralph was almost alarmed at this mysterious beginning.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you are not doing any harm?"

"Harm! Do you think we are going to hocus anyone and rob him?" sneered Mr. Throgmorton Toms. "You must keep everything secret, because we have got a most valuable thing, a splendid thing, and if it were known or even whispered, every fellow in London would want a share of it. Do you understand?"

"Not quite," answered Ralph. "But I think I understand enough to promise you that I won't say a word."

"Under no circumstances?" asked Mr. Toms, lifting up his finger.

"Under no circumstances! Very well." Ralph assented.

"Nor to anyone."

"Not even to my uncle?" inquired Ralph.

"Certainly not to your uncle," exclaimed Mr. Throgmorton Toms; "he has old-fashioned ideas, and would not understand the thing at all. Neither to your father nor to your uncle, nor to any one else."

"Very well," said Ralph, anxious to get to business, "I give you my word."

"Then read this, while I finish some letters." Mr. Throgmorton Toms handed our hero a sheet of printed foolscap paper, on which he read as follows:

THE ELDORADO GOLD CO. (LIMITED).

CAPITAL, ONE MILLION POUNDS, IN ONE MILLION SHARES OF
ONE POUND EACH.

2s. 6d. payable on application, 2s. 6d. on allotment, and the balance in calls of 5s. each, at not less than three months' interval.

Chairman of Council.

THE RT. HON. THE EARL OF DINGLEFORD, Dingleford Hall, Thorps.

Council of Directors.

LORD RONALD SCATTERTON, Blenheim Club.

SIR BALBRIGGAN HOSE, M.P., Rory House, Co. Lysagh.

MAJOR-GENERAL BOOZY WRAGENUFF, Sabre & Rifle Club, Pall Mall.

MALCOLM OF PORRIO, Strathlaw Castle, N.B., and Ivy House, Chiswick.

JOHN JAMES SMITH, Esq. (Smith, Jones, & Co., of Leadenhall St., and Rio Janeiro), Swindelford Manor, Cavesham.

E. J. BLACK, Esq. (Messrs. Black, Brothers, Manchester and Negroponte, 47, New Lane, Peckham).

H.E. THE MARQUIS DE CASTELLOS Y ESPANA (will join the Board after allotment).

(With power to add to their number).

Bankers.

THE UNITED BANK OF EUROPE.

Solicitors.

MESSRS. PICKUM, BONES, & CO.

Auditors.

MESSRS. FIGGERS, ADDS, COLUMN, & TURNOVER.

Secretary.

JOSEPH LAMBE, Esq.

This Company is formed to purchase and work the extremely valuable Mining and Territorial rights in the Republic of Utopia, acquired by His Excellency the Marquis de Castellos y Espana.

Recent researches (see Appendix A. for Extract from works of Professor Oehsen Kopf and the great explorer Signor Didaldi) prove beyond a doubt that a great portion of the Utopian Republic is identical and conterminous with the country of Cathay. Every schoolboy knows that Cathay, that land of Gold, Silver, and Precious Stones, was the dream of Columbus, and the vision of the mediæval Explorer. It has been reserved for the nineteenth century to show that Cathay is a real country; no mere figment of fiction, or creation of a vivid imagination; but a reality, tangible and attainable by the energy and perseverance which are the special characteristics of the epoch. The reports of it, which are scattered up and down the MSS. of past centuries, are no fables; the Gold, the Silver, the Diamonds, are real; they are there, and they have only to be extracted to realize the most Fabulous Wealth.

Cathay is situated in the upper portion of the Republic of Utopia, its southern frontier being about one hundred miles from the seaboard. It extends from longitude 184° to 187° West, and from latitude 0° to 10° South. This country is intersected with numerous rivers, all of which contain large quantities of Gold in their sands. Samples brought over to England have shown the enormous quantity of Ten per cent. of Gold; while the purity of the metal, being absolutely ten degrees above proof, is far beyond anything previously assayed in the Royal Mint. Nothing has to be done but to dredge these Rivers in order to

bring out Virgin Gold by bucketsful—nay, by cart-loads. The surrounding Hills teem with Veins of Silver, and in many of these Veins are found Diamonds of the Purest Water, Ready for Setting, so that nothing has to be done but to extract the Stone from the Silver Ore, when the Diamond is ready to insert in a brooch, ear-ring, or other ornament. The bountiful hand of NATURE thus saves all the expense of cutting and preparing the Stone, besides dispensing with a great portion of Jewellers' profits.

Samples of the Gold, of the Silver, and of the Diamonds, can be seen at the Company's Offices, No. 259, Lombard Street.

To prove his absolute faith in the undertaking, *H.E. the Marquis de Castellos y Espana* has consented to sell all his rights over the whole country of Cathay for a sum of £250,000 (being a quarter of the capital of the Company), to be *entirely paid in Shares*—the Marquis thus receiving no money at all; and being, in fact, in the same position as any other Shareholder. No ready money whatever will be given to the Vendor, excepting of course the small amount required for the formation of the Company. The balance of the Capital is to be expended in purchasing Dredging Machines, Tools, and Plant, and in equipping an Expedition for the purpose of at once opening up the Rivers and Mines of this extraordinary country.

In the Appendix will be found a number of Reports from scientific men of undoubted reputation, which prove that the statements of the Directors are not exaggerated.

The Directors do not wish to appear too sanguine, and would prefer to abstain from placing before the Public an exact estimate of the Dividends that may be expected. But if they state that every person who obtains an allotment of one thousand shares may safely anticipate a return of £1000 per annum, they feel that they are far within the mark.

When Ralph had finished the perusal of this precious document he was about to exclaim, but Mr. Toms interrupted him.

“Read the Appendix first,” said he, “while I just knock off another letter.”

Ralph did so. It contained a number of letters from various geologists, chemists, and geographers (mostly foreign), certifying to the extraordinary mineral productions of the country of Cathay.

“Now,” said Mr. Throgmorton Toms when Ralph had laid the papers down, “what do you think of it?”

“Think of it?” said Ralph; “why, that it is all nonsense.”

“That, I admit, might be the first impression. But what if the Marquis de Castellos *y Espana* has been there, has procured all the necessary concessions, and having spent two years in investigating the country and putting matters on a legal footing, comes back and says he wants nothing for his trouble

except shares, which, of course, will be valueless if his story is not true?"

"That is certainly curious," answered Ralph.

"That is *the* curious part of it," continued Mr. Throgmorton Toms. "I did not believe it. I put it all down as a swindle" (with a sly wink) "at first, and would not trust all the scientific reports together. But the man says he wants nothing. He has not got the money for the machinery, and all he asks is that *we* should find that. He is so sure of his case, that he is satisfied to wait for the stuff to come home before he gets anything. Here are the specimens."

Mr. Toms produced a small cubical brick of a brilliant yellow. It was marked with the assay stamp, and was undoubtedly pure gold.

"This," said he, "was cast at the Mint out of the gold dust he brought over. I took the stuff to the Mint myself, and here is some I kept back."

The City man then brought out a small glass bottle containing some fine powder of the same brilliant hue, and a larger one in which was a coarser grey powder, striped and dotted with bright specks. It was, he explained, the crude river sand. Finally appeared a knob of silver or some white metal, about the size of a split-pea, in which was stuck a brilliant glistening star, which might well have been a diamond.

The specimens were certainly there. Whether they came from Cathay or not might be doubted; but as the Marquis had brought them free of charge, and as he was ready to procure any quantity of them if only he were presented with a certain amount of paper which would be absolutely worthless unless his promises were verified, there seemed no further possibility of doubt.

"Don't you think that it will take?" asked Mr. Throgmorton Toms.

"Take!"

"Yes. The public will bite to that, won't they?"

"Why should they not, if it is all true?" Ralph inquired.
"But if it is true——"

“Well?” inquired Mr. Toms.

“Why don’t you and your friends keep the discovery to yourselves?”

Mr. Toms bit his lip.

“Well, my dear fellow, you see——,” and he hesitated for a moment, “it is a large sum to find. There are dredgers, and tools, and things, and the expedition will cost a lot of money, much more than *I*, for instance, could afford.”

“I see,” said Ralph.

“And,” continued Mr. Toms, more firmly, as he saw that his hearer was being convinced, “besides, you know, these republics and things out in America are very queer. There might be a revolution there some day. We should get splendid dividends for a few years, and then nothing. No! I have always said that prudence is the soul of business, and that a wise man does not put all his eggs in one basket. Of course I shall take shares—a great many shares—in fact I have taken a lot. But I could not take all, nor even a quarter.”

Ralph admitted that Mr. Toms might be right. “But,” he went on, “how will this splendid thing help me? I am glad of your good fortune, but I don’t see how it will do poor me any good. *I* can’t take shares; I wish I could.”

“My dear fellow,” Mr. Throgmorton Toms replied, “we want an active young man like yourself on the Board. We have good men, certainly; but some of them are scarcely what I should call, well—business men.”

“I should think not,” exclaimed Ralph. “Why, Lord Scatterton has had to leave England, and Sir Rory——.”

“Never mind,” answered Mr. Toms, “their names will do well enough, and they are not so black as they are painted. Don’t mention those little accidents; they are not unusual among the aristocracy. But that is what I was coming to. Many of these men are inclined to be idle, and won’t look after the business. Now we want some young fellow of business habits and brains who will.”

Ralph felt flattered. A young man of four-and-twenty,

occupying a subordinate position in a city office, is always flattered if a senior talks of him as possessing business habits and brains.

"You must join the Board," Mr. Toms went on. "You must write an application for a thousand shares."

"A thousand shares!" Ralph cried out, "a thousand pounds! What are you talking about?"

Mr. Throgmorton Toms went on quickly: "You apply for one thousand shares—that is, a thousand half-crowns. Draw a cheque for one hundred and twenty-five pounds, and I will take care that it is honoured. You will be at once placed on the Board, and will receive a salary as director."

"But that won't pay my debts for a long time."

"No; but the Board want one of themselves to go out to Cathay with the Marquis and look after matters. Now you're the very man to do it. They're all too lazy. Well, they will pay for that trip. I will see that they ask you to go, and give you a thousand pounds for your outfit and expenses, and another thou' when you come back."

Ralph opened his eyes.

"Do you mean to say that my going out to Utopia would be worth two thousand pounds to the Company?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Throgmorton Toms. "An honest man is worth all that," he added, pompously. "And you've eyes in your head, and brains, too. *I* should call it a cheap bargain for them. Will you accept?"

"I must think it over," answered Ralph.

"It does not seem to me to want much thinking over," Mr. Throgmorton Toms replied. "Here is an easy way out of all your troubles—a pleasant trip across the ocean, and a fine career opening to you. How can you hesitate? Beggars must not be choosers, you know."

But Ralph drew himself up sharply, and Mr. Toms saw that he had gone too far. He endeavoured to smooth over his last expression, and at last induced Ralph to agree to accept a seat on the Board. Further than this he declined to go; "for," as

he said, "perhaps the Board will not care to send me out." But he promised to return the next day at four o'clock and take his seat with the other directors. On the Wednesday he could get away at that hour easily. When the door closed behind him Mr. Toms flung down his pen and began pacing the room uneasily.

"Confound the fellow!" he cried aloud, though he was alone, "what a job it was to persuade him! And he may turn it up after all." But would he "turn it up?" Mr. Toms considered. Surely not. The prospect of adventure, the certainty of escape from debt and disgrace, the novelty of the position, and the attraction of being member of a board of directors—all these advantages had been duly presented in their proper turn, and were sure to have their due effect. If Ralph would only sail for Utopia at once it would be a great advantage. The Branscombe name would look well in the prospectus, as not one in a thousand knew that Ralph Branscombe had no money, while everyone was aware of the existence of a very rich Branscombe. And during his absence the Board could make ample use of the name, as Mr. Throgmorton Toms well knew. Such a convenience, too, to get the lad out of the way just now! Why that alone was worth a thousand. Besides, there was no telling what might happen. Utopia was not particularly healthy; a young man with English habits might find out, when too late, that they were inconsistent with a tropical climate. And then there might be revolutions and bandits, or Indians and poisoned arrows, not to mention collisions at sea, and storms. In short, a vista of contingencies unpleasant to our hero was opened up by Mr. Throgmorton Toms' imagination; and he did not seem alarmed at the risks his youthful relative was about to run.

Meanwhile the mind of the latter was strangely troubled. Neither the discomforts of a long sea voyage, nor the hardships of a rough exploration in a wild country, were likely to alarm a young man of Ralph's character. On the contrary, the prospect of discomforts, of hardships, and above all of new and strange experiences, acted on him as a strong temptation to go, and was almost

as effective an auxiliary to Mr. Tomis' plans as the certainty of escaping from his debts. But when the day's work was done, and the evening wore on, while Ralph was slowly smoking one cigarette after another in the solitude of his chambers, his feelings gradually took a tangible form. What were they? What was the reason of his repugnance to Mr. Throgmorton Toms' otherwise so tempting proposal? It took him much time and thought to reply to these questions, even to himself; but the answers were gradually cleared from the cloud of various emotions which disturbed him. They were two: he was unwilling to leave his cousin Diana, and he entertained a lurking mistrust of Mr. Throgmorton Toms.

As to his cousin, he was fain to confess that his being in England or Utopia did not seem likely to affect her conduct one bit. From the various reports which reached him, she was undoubtedly carrying on as violent a flirtation with Colonel Mannerling now as she had carried on with Count Marini last season, and with young Tierce the season before. Sir Henry seemed blind to what went on before his very eyes, and deaf to what was talked of in no very low tones close to his ears. What little reputation was left to Diana by her exploits in London was rapidly being torn to shreds in the smaller but more malicious circle of society round Brancombe Hall. Ralph knew that his presencee was of no use, and that even if he were able to live in the same house as Diana he would not be able to keep her in order. Mrs. Gore did what it was possible to do, but Mrs. Gore had only her salary to look to, and did not wish to risk the loss of her position by quarrelling with her charge. In case of an open quarrel, Mrs. Gore would not remain twenty-four hours at the Hall. And Diana had no one else to stand by her and help her out of any scrape she might get into. Ralph thought if she did get into any serious scrape she might probably turn to him at last. It was not likely, but it might be. Yet was this slender possibility a sufficient reason for refusing Mr. Throgmorton Toms' offer? Certainly not. The contingency might never arise, would most probably not arise for some time, not

before he had returned from Utopia. So that objection must be dismissed as invalid. But the unwillingness to go still remained, reason though he might that it was all nonsense.

Again, why should he mistrust Mr. Throgmorton Toms? That gentleman had helped him a fortnight ago when he was in desperate straits; he was ready to help him again, and in return only asked Ralph to devote a portion of his time to an undertaking which promised to be brilliantly lucrative. Mr. Toms had made no secret of his motives: he wished to obtain the help of Ralph's brains, energy, and youth. These motives seemed to the owner of the brains amply sufficient. Therefore, when Ralph pushed aside the heavy folding doors on the following afternoon he had decided to accept Mr. Toms' offer, and to sail for Utopia at the shortest notice.

The majority of the members of the Council of the Eldorado Gold Co. (Limited) were assembled when Ralph entered the Board-room. For the purposes of this story it is not necessary to introduce the reader to them in detail. It will suffice to say that the Right Hon. the Earl of Dingleford, a pompous but extremely feeble old gentleman, was in the chair, and that the members of the Board all seemed to take their cue entirely from Mr. Throgmorton Toms, who sat on the right of the chairman. Ralph was introduced, all the directors in succession shook hands with him, mumbling something or other, the chairman feebly smiled, and the business of the day was proceeded with. Mr. Toms said that Mr. Ralph Branscombe, nephew of Sir Henry Branscombe, of Branscombe Hall, had agreed to join the Board, and had applied for one thousand shares, which had just been allotted to him. He added that Mr. Branscombe was willing to go out to Cathay on behalf of the Company in order to superintend operations and assist their good friend the Marquis de Castellos y Espana. On this a swarthy gentleman, with very bushy black eyebrows, a close shaven chin, a moustache of formidable dimensions waxed to two sharp points, and wearing a parti-coloured ribbon at his button-hole, rose and bowed.

"When does Mr. Brancombe sail?" asked General Wragenuff, an elderly man with white hair, military whiskers, a high collar, and an extremely red nose.

"Well," answered Mr. Toms, "we ought to be out tomorrow or Friday at latest, and we shall know how things are going by Tuesday next. He might sail by the steamer of the 15th."

"How will things go?" feebly murmured the chairman.

"My lord, 'tis not in mortals to command success," replied Mr. Toms, pursing up his round lips to his sweetest smile, "but I may say in the strictest confidence that I have not the slightest doubt that our capital will be subscribed for many times over."

"Hear, hear," exclaimed Mr. John James Smith and Colonel Wragenuff, while Sir Balbriggan Hose said, "Divil doubt ye," and the chairman smiled.

"Then shall we say the 15th, Mr. Brancombe?" asked Malcolm of Porrig, a tall, gaunt, red-haired man, who, like the General, was unfortunate as to his nose.

"It is rather soon," Ralph ventured to say.

"You can safely leave the arrangements to me, my lord and gentlemen," suggested Mr. Toms, suavely. "I will settle matters with my young kinsman."

"Certainly, certainly; leave 'rangements to Toms, leave 'rangements to Toms," mumbled the noble chairman.

"Shall I draw up a resolution to that effect, my lord?" asked the Secretary.

"Yes, better be in order," answered Mr. Throgmorton Toms, not waiting for the Chairman's answer.

"For? Against? Carried," murmured the latter.

"Anything more, Mr. Toms?" inquired the General.

"Only a few cheques to sign," replied the Secretary.

This formality was soon completed, and Ralph noticed that several of the Board took the piece of pink paper tendered to them with much alacrity. Ralph was surprised at receiving a cheque for two guineas.

He looked inquiringly at Mr. Toms, while the others were taking their hats.

"Wait a minute, Ralph," said the City man. "I must speak to you."

Ralph waited. When the members of the Board had all gone he inquired what the two guineas were for.

"Attendance fee," answered Mr. Toms. "You get two guineas every time you come. You don't mind that, do you?"

"No, I don't," answered Ralph, "but I don't think my presence is worth it."

"Fudge," answered Mr. Toms. "But now look here; you had better go back to Brown, Holland, & Co. and give them notice for the 14th, then come up West and dine with me at the Colonnade Club at seven sharp; we've a lot to settle."

"Thanks," said Ralph, also departing.



CHAPTER XI.

THE LITTLE DINNER.



OUR hero reached his office he found that both the principals had left for the day; he was therefore obliged to postpone the announcement of his intention until the morrow.

The Colonnade was not a very exclusive club, and Ralph was therefore at once ushered into the hand-

some reading-room, where his host was sitting with a gentleman whom he recognised as a member of the Board. "Mr. Black, of Black Brothers," said Mr. Toms. "We will talk over business after dinner," he added; "meanwhile Mr. Black can tell you a good deal about the country and what you ought to take with you."

The dinner was excellent, though rather too long. Mr. Throgmorton Toms seemed particularly anxious that Ralph should try every bin in the Club cellar, and strongly urged just *one* glass of this particular Madeira, one of that special Heidsieck, a taste of this extraordinary Romanée, and just a sip of wonderful '34 port, till our hero soon thought that he had had quite enough. Meanwhile Mr. Black had been painting the attractions of Cathay in colours so enchanting that he felt quite anxious to start at once. After dinner they adjourned to the

smoking-room, where coffee, cigars, and numerous liqueurs were served. Though Ralph had taken a great deal of wine he had his wits sufficiently about him to repeat an inquiry he had already made at dinner. This was the question as to what he was to do when he got to Cathay.

“Look after the Marquis,” commenced Mr. Black, with a half-drunk wink.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Black,” said Mr. Toms, who was as sober as a judge. “The Marquis is a gentleman and an honest man, and requires no one to look after him.”

“Of course not, I beg his pardon,” sneered Mr. Black.

“Hold your tongue,” again said Mr. Toms. “Mr. Branscombe is quite right; we must tell him what he has to do, and we may as well tell him now as next week, eh?”

“Certainly,” assented Ralph. “The sooner the better. I shall be able to prepare and coach myself up.”

“Oh, it does not want much preparation,” sneered Mr. Black again.

Mr. Throgmorton Toms paid no further attention to his colleague, who had evidently partaken too freely.

“First of all,” he said, turning to Ralph, “here is a cheque on account. You will want it, never mind for what,” and he nodded significantly towards Mr. Black. Ralph glanced at the cheque, which was for five hundred pounds, and put it into his pocket.

“Now,” continued Mr. Throgmorton Toms, “when you get out to Utopia you will go up country and will examine the sands of the Cathay River. Of course the machinery will not be there yet, and the results will at first be disappointing.”

“How shall I analyse the sands?” asked Ralph.

“Oh,” replied the financier, “you will be supplied with a case of chemicals, including acids and reagents, and all the apparatus, with instructions how to use them.”

“Oh!” said Ralph.

“You see,” continued Mr. Toms, “it is very important that one of the Board should himself investigate matters. The public is sick of chemists and geologists and experts generally.

What we want is an unbiassed common-sense opinion. You are a large shareholder and a director, so everyone will trust you."

"I hope so," replied Ralph. "At any rate, I will do my best."

"Of course, of course," assented the other. "Well, you being a director, and expecting a good deal of the place, will naturally be disappointed when you find that your first spadeful of sand gives little or no gold."

"But if I am not to expect much gold till the dredging machines arrive," interrupted Ralph, "why should I be disappointed?"

"You *will* be disappointed," repeated Mr. Throgmorton Toms, almost angrily; "at any rate, you *must* be disappointed. You will telegraph home from Utopia (there is a telegraph-office there) that you *are* disappointed, and that you have not found any gold at all."

"But supposing I have found gold?"

"Don't be afraid," Mr. Throgmorton Toms smiled, pursing up his little mouth; "you won't find any. Well, when your telegram comes, of course the newspapers will get hold of it—newspapers always get hold of things—and the city articles will all say that the Eldorado mines are a great disappointment, and the shares will go down to next to nothing."

"That will be a great misfortune, will it not?" asked Ralph.

"Not a bit of it! How young you are! Just listen. We shall buy every share we can lay our hands on—some for you as well; very likely I shall be able to get them for sixpence or a shilling each."

"Perhaps for less," muttered Mr. Black, who was listening approvingly.

"Next," continued Mr. Throgmorton Toms, warming to his subject, "your machines will arrive, and you will find that your sand contains quantities of gold, great lumps in fact. So of course you will telegraph again that you are very agreeably surprised, and that there is lots of gold, and as the telegram comes from a director who is a large shareholder, it will be in the papers again and everyone will believe it."

"But supposing I don't find the gold?" urged Ralph.

"But I tell you, you *will* find it! And then the shares will go up, very likely to a couple of pounds premium, and we shall unload them all on the public, and collar the lot."

"You mean that you will sell the shares for a great deal more than you gave for them, and will make a large profit?" asked Ralph.

"Precisely," answered Mr. Toms, "and of course I shall buy a few thousand for you at sixpence or a shilling, and sell them for you at a couple of pounds. That's only fair, and that will be in addition to your fee."

"But," again argued Ralph, who had not yet grasped the scheme, "what if things don't quite happen as you wish?"

"What do you mean?" inquired Mr. Toms.

"I mean, what if I find a little gold at first, and no more afterwards? Then I shan't be able to send the telegrams you require."

"But I tell you, my dear fellow, that you *won't* find any at first, and *will* find lots when you start at the right place with the machines."

"But how can you be so sure of it?"

"Why, upon my word, I never thought you were so dense," cried Mr. Throgmorton Toms. "Don't you understand? I don't suppose there's an ounce of gold in the whole of Cathay, except what we send there."

"What!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Yes: don't you see? You won't find any at first, and you telegraph home. Very well. When the machines come you start at a certain place the Marquis will show you, and then the first buckets will be full of gold. It is not my business to say how it will get there, but it *will* be there, you may take your oath of *that*. Then you telegraph home the result of your tests, and come back by the next steamer. Your mission will have been accomplished. You will only have to receive two or three or may be ten thousand pounds, as the case may be."

Notwithstanding the fumes of the wine, Ralph at last understood.

"What!" he almost shouted, leaping to his feet, "you want me to help you in this infernal swindle?"

“Be quiet, man!” exclaimed Mr. Toms, seizing his coat and endeavouring to pull him down again. “Don’t use such language here, the fellows are staring at you.”

“Let them stare,” exclaimed Ralph, impetuously. “What! the mines are non-existent, the whole thing is a bubble, and you want me to go out for a paltry thousand and enrich you and your fellow-rogues by fictitious telegrams!”

“You are using much stronger language than the occasion warrants, young man,” said Mr. Throgmorton Toms, assuming an air of injured innocence, “and you forgot that you are in a very difficult position.”

“My position be d——d!” cried Ralph, now thoroughly roused. “You infernal scoundrel! Here, take your money,” and he cast the cheque on the sofa. “Tell your Board of idiots and rogues that I won’t disgrace myself by sitting down with them again. And if you dare to print my name as one of your swindling Directors, I’ll show you up, poor as I am.”

“Remember your word of honour!” exclaimed Mr. Toms, alarmed. “You staked your word not to mention this affair to a living soul.”

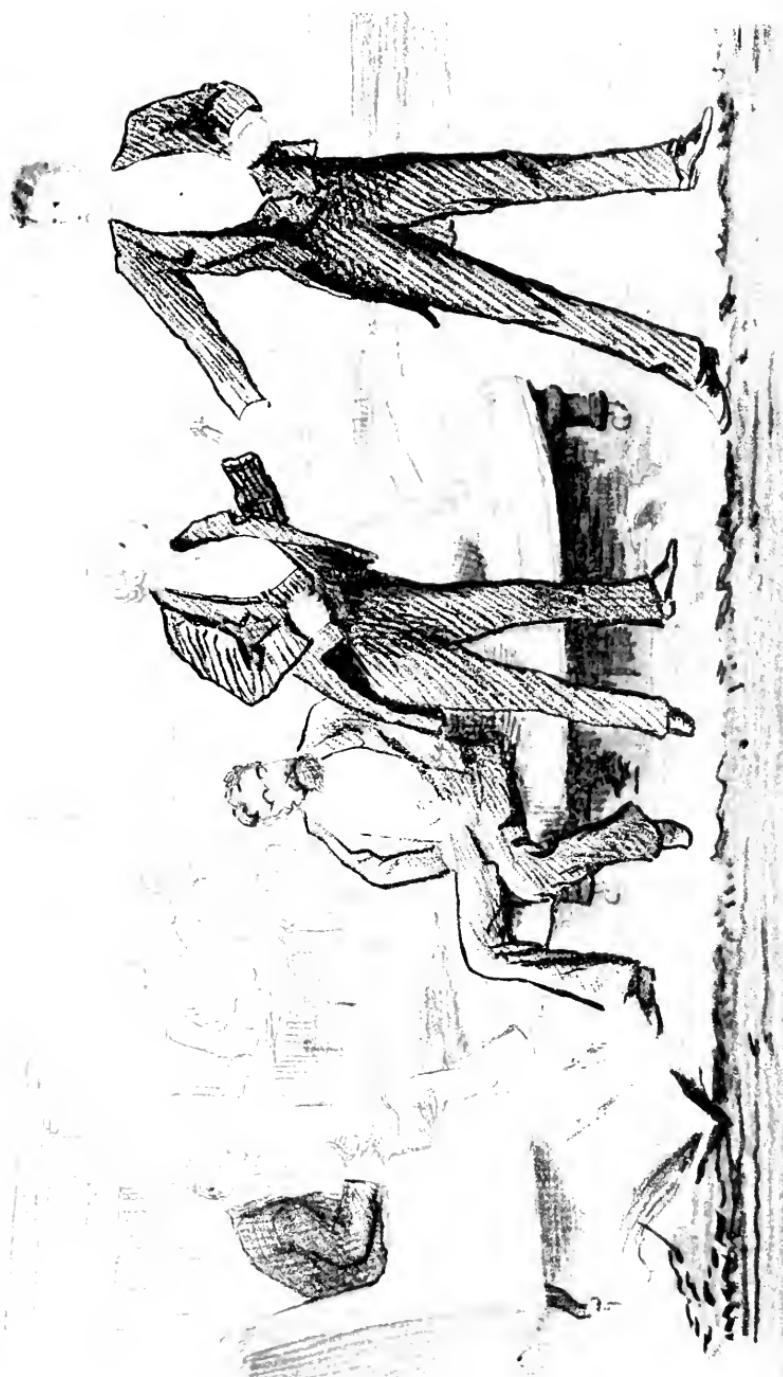
“Nor will I,” said Ralph, “unless you make use of my name. Carry on your dirty tricks if you can find fools enough. Faugh! your dinner and your wine make me sick when I think what you expected of me.”

“There is nothing to be angry about, old man,” said Mr. Toms, reassured now he saw that Ralph would not betray him. “A gentleman proposes a matter of business to another, and the latter declines, that’s all. Perhaps you will reconsider it and take up that cheque again. You’d better.”

“Never. Not if it were for a million! May you have the ill-luck you deserve!”

And with these words Ralph stalked out of the smoking-room of the Colonnade Club, provoking the remark from some of the members present that the gentleman must have dined too freely.

"Here, take your money," said Ralph.



CHAPTER XII.

THE HOLBORN VALE STAGHOUNDS.



SAINTSBURY SNUFFBOX has been more than once mentioned in the course of this narrative, and it is now necessary to describe more fully the functions he fulfilled, and the reasons, good or bad, of Sir Henry Branscombe's attack upon the poor little gentleman.

Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox was not really christened Saintsbury, nor was his family name Snuffbox, but he had acquired the nickname in this wise. The Holborn Vale Staghounds, of which he was secretary, were appointed to meet close to the little town of Saintsbury, the very place where our friend, the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson delivered his fifty-ninth lecture on English pronunciation. Theworthy secretary had arranged in the ordinary manner for a special train from town, so hounds and deer, as well as the sportsmen, were conveyed from London by rail. The secretary was above all things a riding man, but next to his fondness for horses he was most fond of queer bits of old china, and other objects of *virtù*—a mania which had seized him long before the late rage for blue and white was invented. On the way from Saintsbury Station

to the meet he observed a peculiar old snuffbox in a curiosity shop. His attention was attracted by it, and without getting off his horse he enquired the price, and jogged on to the meet, revolving in his mind whether the coveted article was worth the sum asked. On his way back from a good run he decided in favour of the snuffbox, and hastily dashed into the shop, for the train was waiting. He called repeatedly, but no one came; and unwilling to lose so unusual a chance of obtaining a really valuable article for a trifling price, he stood for a moment hesitating. He was bound to lose either the snuffbox or the train; and finally, to save both, seized the former, and dashed into the latter. Of course he intended to send the money next day; but the shopman appeared on the scene just as the train was leaving the station, and knowing nothing of the stranger, nor willing to give him credit taken in so abrupt a fashion, he at once communicated with the local police. The telegraph was set to work, Scotland Yard was informed, and at North London Junction, where tickets were collected, a detective with a policeman in uniform appeared to meet the Saintsbury train. He was at once bailed by his friends, and the matter was cleared up next morning. But on that day he became Saintsbury Snuffbox, and the name clung to him ever since.

The Holborn Vale Staghounds have had an uphill fight to secure a country within reasonable distance of London, and are often obliged to go far afield. Then, their covert hack is the express train of the Midland, North Western, or Great Western Railway. Their head-quarters are double. The hounds and horses are kept at Nazeby on the North Road; but, what is no less important, their rendezvous, the source from which much of the social enjoyments of the hunt is derived, is not a hundred miles from Oxford Street, and is called "The Grey Mare Hotel." Thence on every hunt day issue hampers containing long-necked, gold-corked bottles, huge stone jugs, capacious pies, which conceal in their recesses the savoury flesh of the ox, the goose, and the pigeon, while to these are added large Yorkshire hams, crisp rolls, and white napkins. Where these

delicacies go and what finally becomes of them will hereinafter appear. For the present, suffice it to say that though Nazeby is the nominal centre of the hunt, "The Grey Mare Hotel" is the real one, for it is here that arrangements are made with friendly farmers for a "turn-out," and that funds are distributed with no stingy hands to those who think that their fences have been spoilt or their crops injured.

The Holborn Vale Staghounds are among the finest and the fastest in England. Until a few years of the date of our story they followed the drag only, and were selected entirely for speed, as sufficiently strong scent was provided for them, and a very blunt nose was good enough. In those days the outsider who heard that the Holborn Vale were going to meet near his place, and who was beguiled by the proximity of the rendezvous to join in the chase of the wily herring, was more surprised than pleased at the pace with which hounds went away, and at his inability to keep up with them. It was a matter of honour for Mr. Fitzurse, the gallant Master, to face all the big jumps which the finny denizen of the deep had taken before him, and not to sneak through gates and gaps. Very few men in England and scarcely a woman could ride straight with Mr. Fitzurse. When a well-known steeplechase jockey, mounted on a Grand National winner, made the attempt, he only broke his collar-bone, and some of the places which the Master successfully negotiated on these occasions would have been pronounced absolutely impossible by the hardest riders from the shires. Those who laid the drag were practised hands, and knew what they were about.

But of late years the members of the Holborn Vale Hunt had started a herd of deer which they kept at Nazeby, and they turned one down whenever a farmer gave them house-room and permission to do so. It may be enquired why they required house-room. This is where the hampers from the "Grey Mare" come in. They were sent on to the appointed meet, and when the field arrived, its members found a lavish breakfast laid out for them. Bankshire, with its wide pastures and formidable fences, was a particularly favourite county for the Holborn Vale

Hounds; and of late years special trains had been frequently chartered, and deer, hounds, horses, hunt servants, field, and breakfast travelled down together amicably fifty or sixty miles from the metropolis.

Sir Henry Branscombe swore that when they last turned down near Warboro' seven sheep out of one of his fields were destroyed. Sir Henry proceeded to bring an action against all the members whose names he could ascertain, but the action was dismissed, as the evidence was very weak, and on the evening of the trial three of Sir Henry's finest ricks were burned to the ground. The worthy baronet stoutly asserted that this was the work of the followers of the Holborn Vale. But nothing supported such an accusation; on the contrary, none were more vexed at the misfortune than the Holborn Vale men themselves, and it was rejected as unfounded by the majority of those who in other respects did not approve of that hunt. As a matter of fact, the Holborn Vale cared very much about the friendliness of landowners, and tried very hard to obtain permission for their land to be galloped over. Of course, where the Holborn Vale hounds went, the members of the Holborn Vale Hunt followed, but every endeavour was made to do as little harm as possible. At times an irate farmer had seized the bridle of an energetic sportsman, and some, particularly in the neighbourhood of Warboro', turned out with a posse of labourers to stop the intrusion. But Mr. Fitzurse, keen-scented as his hounds, generally heard of the proposed opposition, and sagely altered the meet rather than provoke open hostility. Warboro' Vale had been the scene of one of the longest runs of the Holborn Vale Staghounds shortly before our story opens. On this day they were less successful than usual. Scent was catchy, and finally the deer was lost. For some days he remained in an outlying covert belonging to Sir Henry Branscombe, whose anger was aroused more than ever when, on his arrival from London, he heard of what he called acts of trespass. The deer had run across several fields of wheat and seeds, which, said the baronet, had been much trampled on; and when Saintsbury Snuffbox addressed him in the manner



HAWHART WITH

“An irate farmer seized the bridle.”

already related, the old gentleman could not restrain his fury. Worse, however, was to follow. The members of the Holborn Vale Hunt were of course not inclined to give up the deer as lost. Within forty-eight hours of the meet at Barkeley Wood a special train disgorged about twenty gentlemen on Warboro' platform, while a dozen horse-boxes were shunted back on to the siding to allow the steeds to leave the train. The men were most elaborately dressed in approved scarlet, with "H. V. H." artistically entwined on bright gilt buttons, hats as smooth as Lincoln & Bennett could produce, boots as shiny as Day & Martin's blacking could make them, and tops as creamy as the produce of the purest Alderney. One nobleman—Lord Kilmainham, whose hunting in Ireland had been stopped in consequence of the Land League opposition—used to patronise the Holborn Vale Staghounds. He accompanied the party to Warboro', where Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox met them on the platform with a very distressful countenance.

"What is the matter, Snuffbox?" cried Mr. Fitzurse as soon as he saw the doleful looks of the secretary.

"Bad job, sir," replied Snuffbox. "Things look very bad down here."

"What, is the deer killed?" asked the Master, anxiously.

"No, but Sir Henry Branscombe has been kicking up an awful row, and blackguarding me all over the place. He won't let us ride over his land."

"That's a nuisance, as our deer is there," exclaimed the Master. "I don't like to take French leave. Does he know we are coming? I told you to keep it dark."

"And I kept it dark enough," answered Snuffbox, "and he has no idea that we are coming down to-day. I have not told it to a soul; but he swore that he would prosecute every one of us if we rode over his land again."

"I don't think he will try that on again in a hurry," laughed Mr. Fetlock, the well-known dealer. "He had enough of it last time. But we would much rather not ride across his place if we were not obliged."

"And he has locked all the gates," continued Snuffbox.

"Then we will jump them," returned the Master. "You are not afraid, are you?"

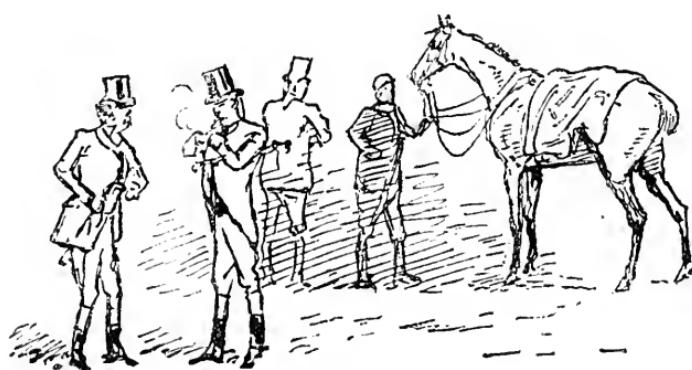
"Well," said Mr. Snuffbox, "I would rather not be seen riding to hounds to-day. I am a resident down here, you know, and Sir Henry might make it very disagreeable for me."

"Nonsense, old man," exclaimed Mr. Fitzurse. "You must come along with us, or you will lose your appointment, by Jove! A secretary should always be to the front, and I'll do you the justice to say that you generally are. And you will see Sir Henry and try and arrange matters with him, won't you, my lord?" turning to Lord Kilmainham, who was listening to the conversation.

"Oh, yes, I will see him," answered his lordship, somewhat hesitatingly. "It is all right, Snuffbox; come along with us. Only let us be particularly careful of wheat and seeds."

Snuffbox unwillingly consented, resolving in his own mind to give them the slip at the first opportunity.

Soon Warboro' was astonished, and its small boys delighted by a procession of horsemen more gaily attired than the followers of the Bankshire Hounds. The cavalcade proceeded up a series of cross country lanes to Grubbin Wood, where the deer had, according to report, been last seen.



CHAPTER XIII.

SIR HENRY IS SURPRISED.

SIR HENRY BRANSCOMBE, Colonel Mannerling and Diana were quietly jogging along a green lane towards Miles' farm.

"I must go in and have a chat with Miles," said Sir Henry, "so you and Di just jog up and down the road while I am inside. I shall not be long."

Sir Henry and his groom disappeared round the ricks, while the Colonel and the young lady sauntered along by the side of the lane.

"I shall have to go up to town next week," said the Colonel. "I really cannot afford to stop any longer."

"I wish you were not going," answered Diana.

"So do I indeed, my darling," replied the Colonel, lowering his voice and drawing his horse close up to Diana's. "But I am not master of my own actions."

"I should have thought you might have done as you pleased," returned the young lady. "If you want to stay so much, I do not see why you should not."

"I cannot explain everything to you, but unfortunately it is so. I must go back to London to carry on the work of my appointment. Surely you can understand that?"

"Oh, yes," answered Diana, "I quite understand that you must do your work as Assistant Adjutant-General or whatever the title is. But——"

"But what?" asked the Colonel.

Diana bit her lip. What she would have liked to say was that she could not understand why Colonel Mannerling, having unmistakably told her that he loved her intensely, did not speak to her uncle and formally propose. She had neither a mother nor a brother to appeal to, and now the Colonel had been making love to her for weeks, and had been demonstrating his affection by

every means excepting the ones he ought as a man of honour to have adopted, her heart sunk at the thought of his going away without any further declaration. He seemed, however, to guess something of what was passing in her mind, for he went on—

“ Diana, dear, you know I adore you more than anyone in the world. There is no woman living who can hold a candle to you, and I think I am not quite without hope, am I ? ” and he attempted to take her hand.

She drew it away.

“ Frank, after what has passed between us it is an insult to ask me whether I care about you. You know I do, a great deal too much. I wish I did not.”

“ Diana, my beloved, all I ask of you is to trust me,” said the Colonel, imploringly. “ Wait. Be patient. There are circumstances which I cannot explain to you, but which prevent my now doing more than asking you to trust me and to continue to love me. Can you ? Will you ? ”

At that moment the *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the approach of a horseman whom they soon recognised as Mr. Stokes. He raised his hat and pulled up his powerful cob.

“ Miss Di,” he called out, “ the Holborn Vale are drawing Barkeley Wood, and I expect the deer will make for the downs. Come on and have a gallop—you and the Colonel.”

Diana’s eyes sparkled and she suddenly threw off the languor which had been stealing over her.

“ Sir Henry is close by at Miles’ farm,” interposed Colonel Mannerling. “ We are waiting for him.”

“ Then we must get Sir Henry to go home by Batch Wood,” said Stokes, “ or he will come across them as sure as fate.”

“ Oh, dear, I hope not,” exclaimed Diana, “ and I should so like to have a gallop ! We do not get one more than once in a blue moon with the Bankshire. Do you not think we might go, Colonel Mannerling ? ” asked she, turning to her companion.

“ Sir Henry is so vexed with the Holborn Vale people,” answered he, “ that I fear that we should make him very angry if we were to ride with them.”

"But I do so want to go," urged Diana. "Could not we manage it somehow?"

"I tell you what," said Stokes, after a moment's reflection; "if the Colonel here does not care about it, let him go and wait for Sir Henry and take the old gentleman home by Batch Wood, and you come along with me, Miss. We will find them, I warrant. We will have a good gallop and be back at the Hall before the Governor knows anything about it."

Diana flushed with eagerness. "Will you do this for me?" she asked Colonel Mannering.

The gallant officer knew how to turn the circumstance to his own advantage. "For your sake," said he, in rather a low voice, "I will try to get your uncle to go home the other way, and it is for your sake that I will not go with the Holborn Vale hounds, much as I should like the gallop. He would never forgive me if he found me out, and I should not dare to show my face here again."

"Thank you," exclaimed Diana, turning her horse's head. "I will trust you," she added significantly.

"Come along, Miss," said Stokes, "there ain't no time to lose. And hi! Colonel! tell the Governor that that little plantation by the turnpike gate wants looking to. That will make him go round by Batch Wood fast enough."

In another minute Stokes and Diana were cantering down the lane at the rate of ten miles an hour, while the Colonel slowly rode back towards Miles' farm.

"Where is Di?" asked the Baronet astonished, when, after some twenty minutes' delay, he emerged from the homestead.

Colonel Mannering had had plenty of time to cook up a plausible story. "I believe she has gone round to see some of her pensioners in the village," answered he. "She got tired of waiting."

"Is she alone?" asked the Baronet, a little surprised.

"One of your farmers came up the lane, Sir Henry. I do not quite know the man's name, but I am sure he is a tenant of

yours. She said she would ride on with him, and he would do what she wanted."

"Oh, very well," Sir Henry said, "we will go on. I daresay we shall meet her if we ride down Barkley Wood lane."

This was the very road which the Colonel wished to avoid.

"Miss Brancombe said something about the plantation at Batch Wood wanting looking to, and suggested that you should go back that way."

"By Jove, so it does," exclaimed the Baronet. "I forgot all about that," and he turned his horse's head and rode in the direction indicated. Everything so far was going on well, and the Colonel hoped that nothing untoward would disturb the smooth current of events. But when they turned out of the turnpike road into Batch Wood lane, the Colonel noticed a spotted object moving rapidly up and down the hedgerow, and then another and another. He muttered an inaudible curse. "I am afraid those blessed hounds are there after all," thought he.

"Dear me, what is that?" exclaimed the short-sighted Sir Henry, adjusting his eyeglass. "Whose dogs are those?" And hurrying on, Sir Henry found some seven or eight couples of hounds feathering along the hedge side. "Thompson's harriers, I suppose," he called out. "Brought them out for an airing, I expect. They must have got away and be on something or other. Wind him," cried out the worthy baronet, rising in his stirrups, "good dogs. Get to him, get to him." And he continued to cheer them on lustily, while the hounds hunted up the hedgerow, occasionally breaking through the fence, but always returning again to the lane, and evidently trying to make out a cold scent. "What on earth are they hunting?" asked the Baronet, puzzled, as the hounds hit it off and tore up the lane straight for Batch Wood. "It cannot be a hare."

Colonel Mannerling knew well enough what it was, and was very anxious to get the Baronet off the drag. "Oh, leave them alone, Sir Henry. I dare say they are only a few stray couples of Mr. Thompson's hounds."

"Oh, but you know we cannot let Thompson's harriers hunt

the country loose," answered the Baronet pointing along the road. "They must have got away from his man, I suppose. But I never saw a hare nor a rabbit run straight along the road like this. I wonder if they have got on a fox, though it does not look much like a fox either," he added reflectively, seeing the hounds turn away suddenly to the left through an open gate. "A fox would have gone for the wood. Curious thing this." But an explanation followed very different from that which the Baronet expected. A crash of music came from the other side of the hedge, and another half-dozen couples of hounds burst into the lane, crossed it, and followed their leaders through the gate. Next was heard a cheery cry of "forrard, forrard, forrard away," and a man with a brickdust-coloured face, a plum-coloured coat, no gloves nor collar, and extremely dirty brown breeches, cleared the big blackthorn hedge and landed in the lane within ten yards of the astonished Sir Henry. Our friend Snuffbox, for it was no other, was scarcely less surprised than Sir Henry himself, but the pace was too good for conversation. Hounds were running some way ahead, and after hesitating for less than half a second, Snuffbox dashed through the gate after them. Before Sir Henry had recovered the use of his voice two other gentlemen came over the hedge almost abreast, both faultlessly attired in bright pink and white breeches, though the latter, as well as their whilom shining boots, showed signs of their having had a gallop. Mr. Fitzurse landed in the lane furthest away from the Baronet, whom he at once recognised. He raised his hat, but never paused for an instant, nor turned to the gate, but jumped the big post and rails exactly opposite, and rode away at the rate of fifty miles an hour. Lord Kilmainham, the second horseman, was not so quick, and having come over nearer the Baronet, the latter was able to stop him.

"I am ashamed of you, my lord," called out Sir Henry. "I am surprised that a nobleman should ride over people's land in this way."

Lord Kilmainham stopped. He was not anxious for an encounter with Sir Henry Branscombe, but he was too much of

a gentleman to gallop away from him. "It was only this morning," he replied hesitatingly, "that I heard you objected to our hunting, Sir Henry."

"I do not, sir, object to legitimate hunting, but I will not have your pack of dogs, and all those fellows who come from no one knows where, riding over my fields and destroying my farmers' crops. I have said so more than once, and I shall now bring an action against you."

"I thought that as we paid for all damage done, and did as little as we could, Sir Henry, you were now willing to allow us to ride over your land," expostulated Lord Kilmainham.

"Who told you that, Sir? It is an infernal lie," roared Sir Henry.

By this time his lordship had quite recovered his composure, and answered calmly, "I thought it must be true, Sir Henry, because several of your farmers and Miss Diana herself are out with us to-day."

"My niece!" yelled the Baronet. "How dare you?" and he lifted up his riding whip threateningly. But his arm stiffened in the air, and further words stuck in his throat, for at that moment a graceful form topped the hedge and a well-known thoroughbred landed safely in the lane.

"Good God, it is Diana!" the Baronet whispered, dropping his whip. So great was his astonishment and wrath that he scarcely noticed poor Stokes, who had crept through a handy gap a few yards further up; while the other sportsmen sneaked through the gate behind his back and disappeared after the hounds before the Baronet had recovered. In two minutes more not a horseman was to be seen. Lord Kilmainham had withdrawn under cover of Diana's arrival. She alone of the field thought it better to stop and face her uncle at once, than to gallop on and leave the old gentleman in a violent fit of anger.

"I have had such a capital gallop, uncle," she began, quite unconcernedly.

Sir Henry only looked at her blankly. He was too much vexed to speak. He did not wish to scold his niece before

Colonel Mannerling, and yet he felt that the offence was almost an unpardonable one.

"Go on," he said to her, in a broken voice. "Go on home."

Colonel Mannerling deferentially pulled his horse back to remain with Sir Henry.

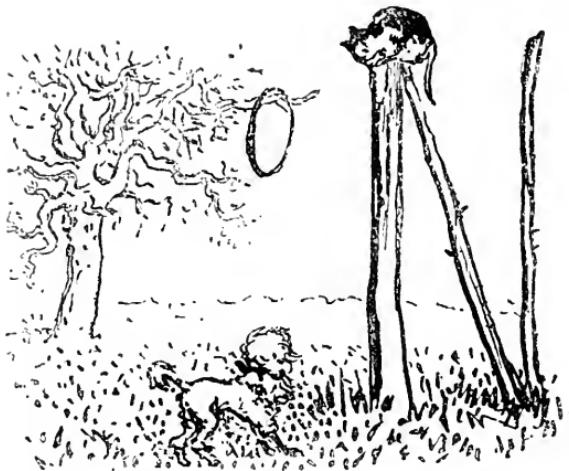
"No," the old gentleman said, impatiently. "Go on with her; take her home. I will come by-and-by."

Very slowly, very dejectedly did the Baronet ride through the narrow lane and the row of bridle gates which led to the Hall. "I do not know what to do with the girl," he muttered. "People fancy that I do not see what is going on, but I see more than they give me credit for. She is a wild flirt, and she is disobedient into the bargain. I must get her married as soon as possible. That is the only help for it."



CHAPTER XIV.

A VISIT TO THE HALL.



THE morning following the dinner at the Colonnade Club Ralph applied to his principals for a day's leave, and obtained it easily for the next Saturday. On Friday evening, finishing his after Indian mail, he

started by the night train for Warboro', and before eleven o'clock next day he was on Lazybones riding to the Hall. The old horse was as fat as ever, and lazier, nor was Ralph disposed to urge him on. For though the need of the visit to his uncle might be pressing, the step he was about to take was decidedly unpleasant. Lazybones plodded along slowly, and only when he stopped to nibble a bunch of grass, or to snatch a thorny twig from the hedge, did Ralph give him a gentle kick as a reminder. He ought to have been preparing a speech for delivery to his uncle, instead of which he found himself thinking of his cousin Diana. He could not cast off the feeling that she was making a grievous mistake of her life. Some flippant remarks of his sisters at breakfast had jarred on him; they talked of her and Colonel Mannerling as inseparable, and yet when little Mary innocently asked whether the two were going to be married, Regina curled her lip and said, "Not likely," while Mrs. Branscombe

turned the subject. Diana was cold to him who, if he did not love her passionately, was at any rate fond and honest, while she was warm to others who might bring misfortune and scandal on her name.

At last he arrived at the Hall, where the door was at once opened by a footman who had been deeply engaged with a newspaper.

“Is my uncle in?” enquired Ralph, as he put his umbrella in the stand.

“Sir Henry is with Mr. Toms in the study,” replied the man. “Mrs. Toms is in the drawing room; they have just arrived from London.”

“I will go in to my uncle,” said Ralph, moving on.

“If you please, sir,” said the servant, “Sir Henry said as how he was engaged with Mr. Toms, and visitors was to be shown into the drawing-room.”

“Oh, very well,” said Ralph, much annoyed at this interruption, and feeling his courage rapidly oozing away. “I will wait in the dining-room until Mr. Toms has done,” and he passed up the long gloomy apartment, by no means more comfortable than he had been a few minutes ago, and almost tempted to postpone the conversation altogether to a more fitting opportunity. The footman, however, must have announced him to Sir Henry, for in a few minutes he returned, and holding the door open said, “This way please, sir,” as if Ralph forsooth did not know every inch of the house. Thus, Ralph was impatient and humiliated before he entered his uncle’s study, although probably he would not have felt aggrieved if he had not been annoyed by Mr. Toms’ presence.

Sir Henry, who was sitting at the table with Mr. Throgmorton Toms, shook hands and said, “Sit down, Ralph; I will talk to you directly. Anything particular?”

“Well, no; well-er, yes, rather, uncle,” answered Ralph.

“How do, Ralph,” said Mr. Toms, extending two fingers of a flabby hand which the young man pretended not to notice. “You here?” This was his usual salutation, and was uttered

with an invariable tone of surprise, as if after Wednesday evening's discussion Ralph's visit to his uncle was a most extraordinary and unheard of occurrence.

It was perfectly natural to find Mr. Toms at the Hall, and yet Ralph was peculiarly irritated at meeting him there. "Very likely the little beast has been poisoning my uncle's mind against me," he thought. "Sure not to forgive me Wednesday's scene." He took up the *Athenaeum* while the two finished their conversation, which, however, turned on nothing more important than repeated instructions to Mr. Toms to sell certain stock and to buy other within certain limits—matters which had evidently been already discussed and settled before Ralph's arrival, and were now only being summarised once more for greater certainty.

At last Mr. Toms rose. "I will leave you with Ralph," he said.

"Yes, Ernest," said Sir Henry; "I suppose Lucy is in the drawing-room with Diana. If Ralph does not keep me too long I will join you before luncheon."

"Very well," said Mr. Toms, leaving the room.

"Now," said Sir Henry, rising and going to the fireplace, where he took up his usual position with his right hand on the lofty mantelpiece, his right foot on the fender, and his head bent down, while his eyes looked steadily into the grate, so that it was impossible to detect the play of his features. "Now, Ralph, what do you want?"

There was a timid nervousness in the manner of asking this question which seemed to indicate that Sir Henry suspected what the answer would be, and was as unwilling as his nephew to discuss it.

"Well, uncle," said Ralph at last, finding he was getting no assistance from Sir Henry, who continued staring steadily into the fire, "I am in a great mess."

Sir Henry stooped and put a shovelful of coals on. Ralph feared he would have to repeat his answer, but after a few minutes his uncle said,

“ What are you in a mess about ; women or money ? ”

“ Oh, nothing to do with women, uncle,” said Ralph, “ only money.”

“ Money ? ” enquired Sir Henry, still not raising his head.
“ It was women last time, was it not ? ”

“ No, uncle,” replied Ralph.

“ I think it was,” reiterated the old gentleman.

“ I assure you not, Uncle Henry.”

“ How much do I give you a year ? ” asked Sir Henry, suddenly looking up for an instant.

“ Three hundred pounds,” replied Ralph.

“ Three hundred pounds ? ” asked Sir Henry.

“ Yes, uncle.”

“ Cannot you make three hundred a year do, besides your pay ? ” and he poked the fire vigorously.

“ I am afraid not, uncle.”

“ How much do you want now ? ”

“ That depends upon what you will give me,” answered Ralph, afraid to mention the figure of his liabilities.

“ It is no reason, because I am a rich man,” said Sir Henry, “ that you should spend money recklessly and incur debts for me to pay them,” and he followed some sparks with his eyes as they flew up the chimney.

“ I know,” said Ralph.

“ You don’t know,” continued the old gentleman, “ or if you do, you don’t act as if you did. What do you want the money for ? ”

“ To pay my debts,” blurted out Ralph.

“ When did I pay them for you last ? ” asked Sir Henry.

“ Last year,” replied our hero.

“ No, that was about some lady,” Sir Henry went on, and at last he looked up. “ Let me see, wait a minute,” and Ralph waited, standing first on one leg and then on the other, while Sir Henry went to his escritoire, and after rummaging about in the papers pulled out a small vellum-covered volume, probably his banker’s pass-book. “ Let me see,” he said ; and he went over the

items, muttering as he counted them over, "Royal Convalescent Hospital, £27 10s.; Hughes, £40; Wilson, job-master, £23; Hospital for Incurables, £50; Birmingham stock, £200; Diana's new dress, £25," and so on. "Oh, here we are—'Ralph Branscombe, £500,'" and he looked up almost smiling. "You are quite right, Ralph, it was money, not some girl. Dear me, I thought it was women. I did help some one out of a scrape with a lady. I really thought it was you," he repeated. "Did you never get into a scrape of that sort? To be sure you did not," suddenly said Sir Henry, as his eyes lighted up. "Of course, it was not you, it was your father."

Ralph coloured up to the roots of his hair, but his uncle, apparently quite unconscious of having committed an indiscretion, returned to his post by the fire, again leaning on the mantel-piece, and now holding his pass-book in his left hand.

Ralph did not know whether to go on or to wait.

At last the old gentleman said, "Will you keep straight if I pay your debts this time?"

"I will," answered Ralph, stoutly.

"How much are they?" enquired Sir Henry again.

Ralph felt that he had better tell the whole truth at once. "Nearly a thousand pounds, uncle."

The old gentleman showed no symptoms of surprise. "A thousand pounds! It is a great deal of money," said he, quietly. "It takes a long time to make, honestly. I don't think," he said, still staring at the grate, "that I have any guarantee for your keeping straight if I pay your debts this time. What guarantee can you give me?"

"None but my word, uncle," replied Ralph.

"You have broken that already."

Ralph winced. "I know I have."

"Well," continued Sir Henry, "it appears that you cannot make four hundred a year do. Now what can you as a bachelor live on?"

"I really don't know," answered Ralph.

"Let me see," said Sir Henry. "If I give you a thousand

"Have you asked her?" enquired Sir Henry."

HENRY, 1860.



now, you will have spent one way and another about £1400 this year."

"Not quite so much as that, uncle. Some of them are old debts."

"Well, never mind, nearly £1400. Now, I cannot afford to give you £1400 a year, nor anything like it, for you to waste on society. You go into a good deal of society, don't you?"

"Yes, I go out a good deal," answered Ralph. "Well, society and races, and drags and horses, and that sort of thing."

"I like my nephew to ride to hounds. No money lenders?"

"Well, there are a couple."

"That is very bad," said Sir Henry, gravely. "It is very foolish to put yourself in the hands of these blood-suckers. Every pound you borrow from a money lender costs me five. Don't do it again. Promise me that solemnly."

"I will, uncle. I will not go near a money lender again if you will help me this time."

"Wait a minute," said Sir Henry, thoughtfully. "I am not sure that I shall help you."

Ralph's heart sank within him. Was all this cross-examination and re-examination to lead to nothing? Was this painful interview to be in vain?

Sir Henry continued to stare into the fire for a time, which seemed to Ralph to be an hour. He said nothing, but occasionally looked into his pass-book. At last he spoke. "You must give me some guarantee that you will not get into debt again, and I will increase your allowance."

"Thank you, uncle," said Ralph; "any guarantee you like to mention."

"I think the best guarantee will be," said Sir Henry, very slowly, "that you should marry Diana."

Ralph's heart leaped to his mouth. "Marry Diana!" he exclaimed. Then after a pause, "But she won't have me, uncle."

"Have you asked her?" enquired Sir Henry, looking up sharply.

“No, uncle, but——”

“Then how do you know? It is your business to get her consent, not mine. I will tell her that I wish it, that is all I can do. But, of course, if she will not have you, the guarantee is at an end.”

“I don’t think she will,” repeated Ralph.

“I don’t agree with you,” said his uncle, drily. “At any rate you must try. Will you?”

“Yes, uncle,” answered Ralph, rather despondingly.

“Very well. Of course I cannot ask any more than that you should do your best. If you fail you are released from any engagement. If you succeed I will allow each of you a thousand a year, besides your present allowance. That will be £2400 between you. Can you live on that?”

“I should think so, uncle,” replied Ralph, instantly.

“Don’t be too sure, Ralph,” replied Sir Henry. “You have managed to spend more than half that by yourself, but Diana is a careful girl. I know she will keep you straight. Will a thousand clear you of all debts? Are you quite sure?”

“I am quite sure,” answered Ralph, after a moment’s reflection.

“Very well then, you shall have it.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

Then finding that Sir Henry still did not move, he said, “Good bye, uncle, and very many thanks. I will go to Diana now.”

“Wait a minute, Ralph,” and Sir Henry again walked to his escritoire, and drawing out his cheque-book slowly filled up a form, which he handed to his nephew. It was for twelve hundred pounds. “I have given you something over; and, of course, stop to lunch and dinner,” he added.

CHAPTER XV.

RALPH'S DOUBTS.

OUR hero would have preferred leaving Branscombe Hall at once, and going home to think over his uncle's proposition, rather than face Mrs. Throgmorton Toms, Mrs. Gore, and Diana, particularly Diana, in the drawing-room. But he felt that after the conversation he had had with his uncle, it would be peculiar conduct to ride away with a cheque for the money in his pocket, and not even to appear in his cousin's room. Here he found the inevitable Colonel Mannering, as well as Mrs. Toms. They were discussing the Holborn Vale exploit, which had only just been recounted to the new arrival from London, and which Diana once more described for Ralph's benefit.

In the course of conversation Colonel Mannering mentioned that he was going back to town on Monday, adding that unfortunately he feared he should be unable to return again during the present hunting season. Ralph pricked up his ears when he heard this information, and resolved that in the course of the next week he would make an endeavour to carry out his uncle's wishes, which, it must be confessed, were his own too. Of course when Sir Henry entered the drawing-room, all allusions to the proscribed pack were at once dropped; and Ralph, though not so successful as he could have wished in avoiding Mr. Throgmorton Toms, yet on the whole spent a less disagreeable afternoon than he had anticipated. Diana was gracious to him, Colonel Mannering talked a good deal to the Baronet, and a visit to the stables, in the course of which Ralph prescribed for Diana's thoroughbred, put matters between the cousins on a very comfortable footing. When he arrived at the Rectory, at a somewhat advanced hour of the evening, he found a letter

waiting for him, in a cramped handwriting, which he recognised as that of his Aunt Janet. It ran as follows :—

“ MY DEAR RALPH,

“ You have often promised to come and spend a day with me at Silverstone, but have never yet done so. Now I want you to oblige me in a matter in which I cannot do without the advice of a person acquainted with horses. I do not understand these quadrupeds, but I believe that you spend a good deal of time riding, and therefore are able to judge them. I am told that it is very dangerous to trust horse dealers ; and being anxious to purchase a horse, I should be much obliged by your assistance in the matter. If you will come to Silverstone next week, I will tell you all about it. My little ward, Marion Dawson, will be very glad to see you ; and you shall have as good a dinner as you can get at home, and a well-aired bed. Any day will suit me. Perhaps Saturday to Monday would be most convenient to you. Give my best love to your mother, and your sisters, and believe me to remain

“ Your affectionate Aunt,

“ JANET NETTLERASH.”

Ralph was rather annoyed at this invitation, because he felt that he could not decently refuse it ; and if a visit to Silverstone was at ordinary times rather a bore, it became nothing short of a positive nuisance at so momentous a period of his life, when he had to obtain from Diana the answer to a question on which his whole future turned. But he felt that he could not absolutely refuse ; and, therefore, when on the following day he settled down to his correspondence, and drew one cheque after another in favour of those creditors who had waited so long for their money, and of whom Mr. Toms was the first, he also indited a note to Miss Nettlerash, promising to go to Silverstone at as early a date as possible. He had seen his Aunt’s *protégée* once or twice, and recollects her as a delicate-looking girl, with big eyes, but no more attractiveness than a school girl of her age would generally have for a young

man of his. What on earth could Miss Nettlerash want with a horse? That puzzled him. The old lady was not going to begin riding at her time of life, surely! She was in the habit of driving about the country in a cumbrous, close carriage, belonging to the Landau family, which carriage was drawn by two greys, or rather whites, aged nineteen and twenty-three years respectively, which she jobbed from a London livery stable-keeper. She had driven the same horses ever since her sister's death left her in affluent circumstances, and she was not likely now to plunge into the extravagance of starting a stylish turn-out of her own. The two greys had become a part of Silverstone. You could hang your hat on their ragged hips, and lay an egg in the hollow over their eyes, without any danger of its falling out, even when they trotted. Their average pace was about six miles an hour; and they were as well known within a radius of five miles of Miss Nettlerash's residence as the local letter-carrier. The coachman, whom Ralph had always suspected of selling half the forage sent down for the horses, was a complete fossil; and his tenure of office was not likely to cease until Miss Nettlerash departed this life. She had the greatest regard for his opinion, and trusted him quite as implicitly as Sir Henry trusted the renowned Boulter. If a purchase in horseflesh were contemplated, why should not the old coachman have been consulted rather than Ralph? These, however, were trifling matters, which would not have disturbed our hero at all, had his mind not been agitated by the important events of the day. Could he fairly propose to his cousin? Would it not be dishonourable to take advantage of the pressure which Sir Henry would undoubtedly bring to bear upon her? Besides, was his cousin a fit person to become his wife? He was obliged to admit to himself that she was not. Even her most strenuous advocate must have confessed that her behaviour for the past two years had not been such as to make her a suitable match for a man who did not wish his wife to be talked about, nor her name to be in every one's mouth. If Diana Branscombe had as a girl flirted so out-

rageously with various men, that her name was coupled with theirs in a manner highly unpleasant to the feelings of even a cousin, what could he expect of her when she was emancipated from the constraint which confines even the most careless of maidens ? He might, indeed, have had more confidence in the future if Diana had ever shown signs of affection for him. A great and overwhelming passion has cured many a flirt ; and if Diana were married to a man she adored, she would probably turn out a very excellent wife. But not for a moment could Ralph flatter himself that his cousin entertained any such sentiments towards him. Though not without vanity, the young man was quite sharp enough to perceive that whatever regard his cousin might have for him was of the calmest possible description, and was at most a good-natured, placid feeling, which might change to absolute indifference, but would never be replaced by violent passion. In old days, when her flirtations had only begun, she had often laughed good-naturedly at his warnings, and had listened with a lurking smile to his brief sermons. When her doings with Count Marini had caused her to be talked about at the Orleans and other clubs, Ralph had taken heart of grace, and spoken his mind. But on this occasion Diana had told him to attend to his own business, and had put a stop once for all to any further advice from him. There had been no quarrel, because, as Ralph confessed to himself, she did not care enough about him to quarrel with him. There had been some coolness, which had gradually worn off when Diana found that he no longer thrust his counsels upon her. When she was completely reassured upon this point, and felt that her cousin would spare her his sermons and his warnings, she resumed her friendly, but calm and sisterly ways, without allowing her friendship for Ralph ever to interfere with her flirtations with others. It was quite clear, therefore, to Ralph, that though Diana did not dislike him, nay, positively liked him in a certain way, she did not love him in the least. Taken one way, this was a very painful conclusion ; taken in another, it was almost a relief ; for if she did

not love him, she was not likely to accept him, and he would no longer have to decide the difficult question as to the propriety or otherwise of marrying a girl whose name was tarnished. Still he must risk a proposal. He had promised his uncle he would do so. He now felt that he had been very weak to give that promise; but how could he refuse? He could not tell the old gentleman that Miss Diana Brancombe was not good enough for him. He could not betray his cousin's flirtations, nor inform the Baronet of their gravity, which he evidently did not suspect. He could not pretend that he was in love with somebody else, when in fact, he was devoted to his cousin. To have refused to ask Diana to become his wife, would have been to irritate his uncle, to do his cousin possibly an irreparable injury, and to plunge himself into the ruin and disgrace which he had now been able to avoid. There was no other course open but to urge his suit; and yet he felt that this course was almost as dishonourable as the one Mr. Throgmorton Toms had suggested at the Colonnade Club. For, "after all," thought he, "I am proposing to Diana, in order to get two thousand a year now, and to make sure of my uncle's property at some future time." "No, I am not," whispered a second self; "I am proposing to her, because my uncle wishes it, and because I love her." Neither of the two sides of the argument seemed to carry sufficient weight to enable him to decide what was right and what was wrong. Yet action was urgent; and he had practically pledged himself to one particular course of action. True; but then he had been taken by surprise, and had consented rather hastily to his uncle's suggestion. He might go back and tell him that he could not carry it out; but then the old gentleman would demand back his thousand pounds, for he had given them only on the condition of Ralph's proposing to Diana; and the bulk of the thousand pounds was already travelling up to London by the night mail, to be distributed amongst his various creditors. There was no help for it; he must go on. The grey dawn of a winter's morning was already creeping through the curtains, when Ralph fell into an uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER XVI.

A QUIET TÊTE-À-TÊTE.



winks. Diana was very fond of Mrs. Toms, but not so fond as to want to talk to her all day. The young lady had therefore retired to the little boudoir adjoining her bedroom, which she possessed as her own private property. She frequently hid in this snugger, and was seldom disturbed in it. She was therefore rather surprised when a gentle tap at the door announced the arrival of a visitor.

"Come in," she said, with a suppressed yawn. It was Mrs. Gore.

"Oh! it is you, Polly dear," exclaimed Diana. "What brings you here? Sit down and make yourself comfortable. I was just going to have a nap."

"I have come to have a serious talk with you, Diana," said Mrs. Gore with a solemn face.

"Then go away, dear Polly," answered the young lady, "I don't like serious talks."

"I am afraid you must listen to me all the same, Diana,

WAS Sunday afternoon at the Hall; that sleepy hour after lunch, when ladies willingly drop into comfortable arm-chairs by the fireside; when conversation languishes, and the recollection of the morning's sermon sometimes dies away into forty

dear," said Mrs. Gore, sitting down and taking the girl's hand; "your uncle wishes it."

Diana sat up sharply. "Oh, it really is serious, then?" she enquired. "I suppose it is about Colonel Mannering?"

"Not exactly," Mrs. Gore replied; "but the fact is, your uncle called me into his room last night after dinner."

"Yes," said Diana, "I could not make out what he wanted of you. I heard you were closeted together. What was it all about? A scolding, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," again replied Mrs. Gore, staring into the fire and trying to put her thoughts into shape. "The fact is, Sir Henry wishes you to marry."

"Very kind of him, I am sure," answered Diana. "Whom am I to marry?"

"Well, that is just the difficulty," replied Mrs. Gore.

"Yes," said Diana, "it is difficult to marry when nobody has asked one."

"What!" exclaimed the chaperone, almost jumping up, "has not Colonel Mannering proposed for you yet?"

"No," said Diana, shaking her head sadly, "he has not, indeed. But does my uncle want me to marry him?"

"He has not mentioned the Colonel," replied Mrs. Gore, "but I daresay if the Colonel proposed he would consent to the marriage."

"Then who has asked for me?" said Diana; "I am getting quite curious. I did not know I had any lovers about just now."

"Your cousin," replied Mrs. Gore.

"What, Ralph!" laughed Diana—"how ridiculous! He must be out of his senses. I hope you told my uncle I should not marry him."

"No, my dear, I could not do that," replied Mrs. Gore. "In fact I hope you will."

"I am sure I shall not," answered Diana.

"Wait a minute, dear. Sir Henry pointed out that it was high time you should be married; that it was the dream of his life that you and Ralph should be man and wife; that if you

did so, the property would be left entirely in the family ; and finally told me that Ralph wished to propose to you, but would not venture to do so without Sir Henry's consent."

" He shall not get mine," interrupted Diana.

" My dear child," continued Mrs. Gore, " do think it over."

" It does not want any thinking over," answered Diana, hotly. " I don't care about him. You know I don't, Polly. How can you suggest that I should marry him ?" And she put her arms round her companion's neck.

" My dear," Mrs. Gore went on, " do you care so very much for Colonel Mannerling ?"

" I am afraid I do," whispered Diana, concealing her face in her friend's bosom.

" And has he not asked you to marry him ?"

Diana only shook her head, which Mrs. Gore gently stroked. " Poor child," she said, " I am afraid that Colonel Mannerling is not behaving honourably towards you."

" How can you say so ?" Diana exclaimed, raising her head and flashing an angry glance at Mrs. Gore. " He is a gentleman, a most delightful man, and perfectly straightforward, I am sure."

" Well, my dear," said Mrs. Gore, " the proof of the pudding is in the eating. It is a vulgar proverb, but it is a true one. If Colonel Mannerling loves you as you love him, why does he not propose ? He has a good appointment, and you have plenty of money, or will have if you marry with Sir Henry's consent."

" I don't know," answered Diana, looking down. " He told me there were circumstances which prevented him saying anything definite."

" Circumstances are all very well," answered the chaperone, " but now things have got to such a pass, that he must either declare himself or make room for somebody else."

" I don't want anybody else," answered Diana.

" But your uncle does," continued Mrs. Gore. " He has quite made up his mind that you shall marry as soon as possible. Recollect that your whole future depends upon him ; you have

nothing whatever in the world but what he gives you, and if you displease him you will be a pauper."

"I know," groaned Diana.

"And you would not be happy as a pauper, and love in a cottage would not suit you. You want your horses and your pony-carriage, and your comfortable room, and all your nick-nacks, and your piano; and you would be wretched without these things."

"I should not, if I were married to Colonel Mannerling," said Diana.

"Perhaps not. But do you honestly think that Colonel Mannerling, a man who has been spoiled for many years in London society, who has ridden the best horses, driven a handsome team, kept open house at Ascot and Goodwood, and all that, would put up with an obscure existence on his very moderate pay, which is barely enough for a bachelor?"

"I think he would, for my sake," answered Diana hesitatingly.

"Perhaps he might. I will not deny that love may alter a man entirely, but it does not generally do so, and in this case he has not even proposed yet."

"No, but he will," answered Diana.

"How do you know?"

"I am sure of it."

"Am I to tell your uncle, then, that you wish to wait until Colonel Mannerling proposes? I am afraid he will hardly be satisfied with such an answer," Mrs. Gore said.

Diana sighed. "Why does my uncle want me to marry?" she asked.

"The fact is, my dear," Mrs. Gore answered, "I believe Sir Henry sees much more than we give him credit for. I believe he knows all about your goings on with Count Marini and Mr. Tierce."

"I do not care about that," answered Diana.

"Very likely not, but you must confess that there is some ground for complaint on the part of your uncle."

"I did not do any harm," said Diana again.

"No real harm, perhaps," answered Mrs. Gore, "although

you know I could not possibly countenance those men going on with you and kissing you, and all that."

"Well, it is all over now," said Diana wearily. "Don't go over the old ground again. Heaven knows, you have scolded me enough about that wretched Marini." She suddenly burst out laughing. "Do you remember his coming down here in November, and what a figure he looked riding round the ring on old Peterborough? I shall never forget the little wretch as long as I live."

"But let us be serious, dear," interrupted Mrs. Gore. "The Count is done for; so is Mr. Tierce; and I wish Colonel Mannerling were."

"He never will be," Diana interjected.

"Don't speak like that, Diana; it is quite clear that Sir Henry will not allow any more goings on."

"I suppose he will expect me to have the servants in for prayers morning and evening, and do nothing but parish visiting now."

"Don't be silly. Sir Henry is evidently determined not to have any more of those flirtations, which do you no good; and he thinks the best way to put an end to them is that you should marry; and I must say that I agree with him."

"You do?" exclaimed Diana.

"Yes, I fully agree with Sir Henry. Now, dear, why don't you listen to reason? If Colonel Mannerling will not propose—and he certainly does not seem inclined to do so—accept your cousin."

"I don't care about him," replied Diana.

"He is a very good fellow," observed Mrs. Gore, "a dutiful son, clever, straightforward, and decidedly good-looking; and I believe him to be thoroughly kind-hearted. Do you recollect how he got you out of that scrape when you came home from the theatre alone with Count Marini? There would have been an awful row if your cousin had not been clever and kind enough to help you."

"Oh yes," answered Diana impatiently. "I know he is very good, and all that, but I don't care about him. I look upon him as a sort of brother half removed."

"I am sure he would make an excellent husband," continued Mrs. Gore. "You would be as happy as the day is long. He is very fond of hunting, too, and of driving, and all of your favourite pursuits."

"But I don't care about him," again repeated Diana.

"But you will when you are married; I, as an experienced married woman, can tell you that."

"Don't argue any more," said Diana. "It can never be as you wish."

"Don't say that, dear," persisted the chaperone; "you see Colonel Mannerling has no serious intentions."

Diana was silent for some minutes, looking into the fire. At last she said, "Well, Polly dear, I don't want you to tell my uncle that his niece is wilful and obstinate; but I cannot promise to accept Ralph unless——." And she stopped.

"Unless Colonel Mannerling gives you up altogether," suggested Mrs. Gore.

"I don't quite mean that. I mean that I should like to give Colonel Mannerling one more chance. I should like him to know that there is some one else in the field, and that he must make up his mind at once, or I shall almost begin to think he does not love me."

"Shall I tell him?" asked Mrs. Gore.

"Certainly not," answered Diana; "that is my business. He is to go to-morrow, but I will have it out with him first. Leave it to me, Polly."

"What will you do?" asked Mrs. Gore.

"I cannot tell," replied Diana.

Mrs. Gore was alarmed. Visions of an elopement and its attendant scandal crossed her mind.

"My dear child!" she exclaimed, "you are thinking of some desperate step. Let me beg of you tell me what you propose doing."

"Nothing very dreadful," said Diana, smiling. "Do not be afraid, Polly dear. You won't be compromised, and I shall not, either."

"Promise me that you will be very careful, Diana, and will not do anything to displease Sir Henry."

"I promise that he shall not know anything about it, and that there will be no row at all. There, Polly, that is all I shall tell you. You may leave it to me, and in twenty-four hours you will have to admit that you are mistaken in Colonel Mannerling, and that he is as honourable and loyal as he is pleasant and good-looking."

"Very well," sighed Mrs. Gore; "what am I to say to your uncle?"

"Nothing for a day or two," answered Diana.

At that moment there was a knock. On Diana's summons her maid stepped in and announced, "Mr. Ralph, please Miss."



CHAPTER XVII.

THE MERRY MONTH OF MAY.



SMALL hostelry, which disagreeable people might call a public-house, rejoiced in the above euphonious appellation. It was situated at Silverstone, not far from Miss Nettlerash's place. On an evening in the same month of December when the events related in

the previous chapter took place, a tiny room behind the bar of the "Merry Month of May" was occupied by an individual whose appearance betrayed him as one familiar with horses, while his features were scarcely such as to inspire immediate or entire confidence. A sallow face, a nose which might have been once aquiline but was now swollen out of all shape and of a deep red, a large mouth containing irregular black teeth, a receding forehead, were the characteristics which made his nickname of Handsome Joe appear but a sorry jest. Handsome Joe was conversing affably with the landlord of the "Merry Month of May," to beguile the time while waiting for a friend.

Handsome Joe began to get impatient. At last a well-known voice was heard in the bar.

"Come in, Mr. Bingham, come in," said the landlord. "Mr. Joseph has been waiting for you ever so long."

"Good evening, Joe," said Mr. Bingham, extending his hand while he nodded to the host. "Could not help it. The old woman was such a long time over her visits to-day. Thought that we should never get home at all. Now, Smith," added he, turning to the landlord, "let's have a pint of half-and-half and then leave us to our business."

"Yes, Mr. Bingham, certainly," said the man, adding, with a wink, "I'll see that you ain't disturbed."

As soon as the pot was placed on the grimy table, stained by numerous rings of previous pots, Mr. Bingham produced a parcel, which he proceeded to open.

"The old woman has taken to the co-operative stores, Joe," he began.

"So I hear," answered Joseph. "How do you get on with them?"

"Well," said Mr. Bingham, "what I says is, as long as my missus behaves as she oughter I shall behave right and proper to her."

"Quite right," ejaculated Handsome Joe.

"But, says I, she is giving up honest tradesmen—Robinson, the saddler, here in Silverstone, and Ricketts, in Jermyn Street, them's what I call good shops, them are. Sound saddlery, stout leather, ten per cent. commission, and no questions asked. As long as the old woman stuck to them everything was all right in the stable. She didn't take much account of the bills when they came in at Christmas, and there was always a sovereign or two when the cheques was wrote."

"Besides the ten per cent.?" asked Handsome Joe.

"In course," replied Mr. Bingham, "that's hextra. But now, what does the old woman do but want to go and buy her sponges and rollers and every little bit of strap I wants at them co-operative stores? She drives up to town and keeps me wait-

ing with them old hosses half a day in the Haymarket, while she toddles up and down the place and buys everything herself and pays for it on the nail. *Cheek, I* calls it. What do *you* think?"

"Well, it is rather hard on yon," said Handsome Joe.

"'Ard on me! I should think it were," growled Mr. Bingham. "No chance of a couple of shillings in the pound there, I can tell you. And fine rubbish she gets for her money too. Well, I say it ain't fair, and if I ain't treated fair and square I don't see that there is any call for me to treat other folks fair and square. Is there, Joe?"

"No, there ain't," answered Joe promptly—"tit for tat."

"That's what *I* say," continued Mr. Bingham. "As long as the old woman went to honest tradesmen my hosses got all they wanted, as well as any dook's. But what can she expect now when she goes to them stores and deprives a honest servant of his doos? Somehow we wants three times as many sponges and cloths and brushes and things as we used to, so she won't find much saying that way, *she* won't." And with this asseveration Mr. Bingham unfolded the contents of his parcel, which contained two new sponges, two horse rollers, several brushes, a currycomb, and some other articles of use in the stable. "Now, Joe," he said, "just take a list of that lot and see what you can get for them."

Joe produced the stump of a pencil and a dirty note-book, stuffed the pencil into his mouth and slowly proceeded to write down a list of the articles. Before he had quite finished, Bingham inquired—

"Brought the cash for last month, Joe?"

"Yes, Mr. Bingham," replied that gentleman. "Two pound seventeen and six. There was two quarters of oats and three trusses of hay, and —"

"That will do, Joe, that will do," interrupted Mr. Bingham. "I believe that's right enough. But we've got more business to talk about to-night—better business than oats and hay."

"What is that?" asked Handsome Joe curiously.

"Joe," said Mr. Bingham, raising his forefinger and pointing it at him. "Joe, five to one you won't guess."

"Better tell me at once, then, Mr. Bingham, and satisfy my curiosity."

"It is a rum go, Joe," continued Mr. Bingham, slapping his friend's knees; "it is a rum go, and blest if I don't have another drop of beer before I tell you, just to wet my whistle."

The beer was brought, nor was a pot for Handsome Joe forgotten. When the door again closed the latter gentleman said, "Now go ahead, Mr. Bingham. What is it all about?"

"Wait half a minute till I have filled my pipe, Joe. The old woman is very bad about 'bacey, but I don't think she will send for me to-night again, so here goes. It is a rum go," he at last said, when his pipe was in full swing. "What do you think?—the old woman wants to buy a horse!"

"Buy a horse?" said Handsome Joe, inquiringly. "Well, better late than never."

"That is what *I* say," answered Mr. Bingham. "But when I says she wants to buy a horse I oughter say she wants to buy a pony. You have seen that young girl that's a stopping along with us?"

"Not that *I* knows on," answered Joe.

"Well, she has took up with some vagrant girl or other—some mountebank's daughter, I believe; and she is bringing her up like a real lady. Now nothing will do but what this girl must have a pony; and the old woman says to me, says she, 'Bingham, Miss Marian wants a pony.' Well, I ain't got no call to discourage the idea, so I says, 'All right, mum;' and she says, 'Bingham, do you think you could find a pony for Miss Marian?' so I says, 'In course I can, mum."

"I should reyther think you could," interjected Mr. Joseph, with a wink.

Mr. Bingham continued: "This young girl, you see, has been having riding lessons down at the school; but now nothing what she gets there ain't good enough for her, and she wants to

have a horse of her own—the little upstart! It ain't *my* business to interfere with the missus about her, be it, Joe?"

"I should think not," answered Joe, with another wink.

"So I says, 'Very well, mum; I'll look out for a pony for Miss Marian,' and that's my business with you to-night, Joe. You know the sort of pony I want, don't you?"

"I think I do," answered Joe.

"Well, you just tell me your idea of a pony, then, and I will tell you if it fits mine."

Joe answered unhesitatingly, "The sort of pony you want, Mr. Bingham, is an animile that you can get a ten-pound note out of."

"That is exactly it, Joe. I see you know all about it. Ten pounds, or twelve, it may be. Well, look here, Joe, it must be all fair and square. No vice, mind. No nasty kicking brutes, what will kill that young girl. I have no call to get that young girl killed, Joe."

"Of course not," assented Joe. "A nice, quiet, animile is what you want. How old is the young lady?"

"Young lady!" sneered Bingham. "Why I told you she was only a vagabond's girl. I should think she is fourteen, or may be fifteen. A thin slip of a thing; no substance, but pretty tall. Puts up about Derby weight, I suppose, saddle and all."

"Can she ride?" asked Joe.

"Ride!" Mr. Bingham rejoined. "Brought up as she has been, of course she can't ride. She sits on a thing that has got four legs and a tail and a head, and she don't tumble off, and she calls it riding. But mind, Joe," and Mr. Bingham raised his hand warningly, "we mustn't let the girl be hurt, and we mustn't spoil our characters. We must be quite straight."

"Certainly," assented Joe, again. "I think I know the very thing you want."

"What is he like?" asked Mr. Bingham.

"Good looking pony," replied Joe; "nice paces; baby could ride him; goes in harness; only seven years old; stands about fourteen hands; quiet as a lamb."

"Showy, eh?" asked Mr. Bingham.

"Very showy," answered Joe; "quite a flat-catcher."

"What is the figure, Joe?" Mr. Bingham inquired further, "and who does he belong to?"

"A pall of mine, Goswell Road way," answered Mr. Joseph. "But of course he is a captain in the army, he is."

"I don't think the old girl quite likes captains in the army," Mr. Bingham remarked reflectively. "Better let him be a parson. Can't your pal be a parson, Joe?"

"Ay," answered Joe, "no reason why my pal shouldn't be a parson as well as an ossifer, if you think it'll fetch the old woman better."

"I am sure it would," continued Mr. Bingham. "The old woman is very sweet on parsons, but she don't like them soldier officers at all. What is his figure?"

"I think I could get him for about twenty-five," answered Joe.

"How much back?" asked Mr. Bingham.

"Oh, usual terms," said Joe; "half back, of course. You could have a ten-pun note, and leave me two pound ten for my trouble."

"But what is it?" asked Bingham again.

"What's what?"

"I mean what is wrong with the pony?"

"Oh, nothing as you or I knows of," answered Mr. Joseph. "Subject to a little bit of a cold sometimes, that is all."

"Oh, that is all, is it?" smiled Mr. Bingham. "That will do for me; only mind, he must not have any cold on him when he comes down here to show off."

"No fear of that," answered Joseph. "He will be as sound as a bell, then. When shall he come?"

"Could not your pal write a letter to the old woman?" asked Bingham.

"Of course he could," replied Joe. "But now I must be off. She shall have a letter by the next post."

The friends parted, another quart having previously been





"He does look pretty, my dear!"

consumed with mutual protestations of esteem. By the next evening's post Miss Nettlerash received a neat note on mourning paper, in which the Rev. Herbert Brown presented his compliments to her, and hearing that she wanted a pony for her little niece, begged to offer her his pet "Raven," which had been ridden for two years by his only daughter, for whose loss he was now in deep mourning. Miss Nettlerash looked upon this note as almost a godsend. Bingham had just informed her that it was very difficult to find an animal to suit Marian Dawson, and, anxious as she was to please the child, while at the same time she was very much afraid of being duped by horse-dealers, she scarcely knew what to do. But a clergyman who had just lost his only daughter was certainly not a horse-dealer, and she could thoroughly rely upon such a man not to deceive her, particularly if, as she intended, honest old Bingham was called in to examine the purchase. By return of post the Rev. Herbert Brown received a note asking him to be good enough to send the pony down to Silverstone to be looked at. Next day the pony appeared, a really good-looking black, well ribbed up, with nice sloping shoulders, and good quarters. When led up and down his fine action and flowing mane and tail at once fascinated Marian Dawson, who exclaimed, "Oh, Miss Nettlerash, what a darling!"

"He does look pretty, my dear," said Miss Nettlerash, raising her glasses to her eyes, "but I don't know whether he is sound. Bingham must look at him."

Bingham was at once summoned, and affected much surprise that Miss Nettlerash had herself sent for the pony without consulting him. The old lady admitted that he had some ground for offence, and almost entreated him to forgive her and examine the pony impartially. This Bingham proceeded to do, and finally said:

"He seems a good pony enough, mum, but I don't know whether he will carry a young lady."

This doubt was soon set at rest. A side saddle was put on the cob, and the stable-boy mounted him with a horse-cloth

round his waist. After this it was considered safe for Marian Dawson to try him herself, Bingham being at her side, while the man who had brought the pony, no other than Handsome Joe, led him slowly round. Raven was as quiet as a lamb. After two or three turns Joe left his head, and Marian, beginner though she was, was delighted to find herself able to make him trot, walk, or canter just as she pleased. Meanwhile Handsome Joe was not idle. He told Miss Nettlerash a touching story of the Rev. Herbert Brown's bereavement, and the immense value he attached to the memory of his daughter, how whenever he looked at Raven the poor gentleman burst into tears, and how Mrs. Brown had at last insisted upon parting with the animal, in order that her husband might not so often be moved to sorrow. Miss Nettlerash herself almost felt a tear come into her eye as she listened to the artless narrative.

"Poor man," she sighed. "Well, the pony will have a happy home. What is his price?"

"Thirty guineas, I believe, mum," answered Handsome Joe.

"It seems a good deal," Miss Nettlerash remarked. "I must see about it."

"Just as you please, mum," answered Joe. "I was to go on from here to Lord Kilmainham's in case you did not want the pony, mum. His lordship's very sweet upon him for his little boy."

Miss Nettlerash thought there was no time to lose to secure so excellent a purchase, so she summoned Bingham and consulted with him aside.

"I think it is too much, mum," said Bingham, decisively. "He is a nice pony, but if I was you I would not give more than eight-and-twenty pounds for him."

"But perhaps he won't take it," answered Miss Nettlerash.

"I think he will, mum," replied Bingham. "These grums generally ask more than their masters will take. But if he don't, mum, you can always drive up and offer his master the money. I would not say more than twenty-eight pounds. Five-

and-twenty I *should* say, but then Miss Marian seems sweet upon him, so it might be worth while to give a couple of sovereigns extra."

"What a blessing to have such an honest servant," thought Miss Nettlerash. And then aloud to Joe, "I will give twenty-eight pounds for the pony."

"Sorry, mum, I can't take it," answered Joe. "My master said 'thirty pounds, Joe, or nothing.'"

Marian almost had tears in her eyes when the man disappeared down the drive. But Miss Nettlerash congratulated herself on her firmness, although she had some misgivings as to whether her plan would succeed. In the afternoon she followed Bingham's advice, and in fact instructed him to carry it out. For that gentleman was despatched to town with a cheque for twenty-eight pounds, and orders to see whether he could soften the hard heart of the Rev. Herbert Brown. To the delight of all parties he returned before dinner with the pony, and it need hardly be added twelve pounds in his pocket, of which Miss Nettlerash knew nothing.

Next morning, Marian accompanied by Bingham on one of the white carriage-horses, was taken out for a short ride. The girl had a natural taste for riding, and every hour she spent in the saddle seemed to improve her hands and seat. Raven coughed once or twice during this exercise, but of course Marian, who was unskilled in herself, took no notice of the circumstance. A day or two later, however, she tried to canter, and the pony wheezed so terribly and coughed so often that she was obliged to pull up. In the evening Bingham appeared with a grave face in Miss Nettlerash's dining-room.

"I am afraid, mum," he said, "that pony has got a very bad cold."

"How has he caught it?" asked Miss Nettlerash, alarmed.

"I am sure I don't know, mum."

"I hope it is not serious."

"I hope not, indeed," continued Bingham; "but you never know what change of stables does."

CHAPTER XVIII.

DIPLOMATIC.



WAS

much astonished at her cousin's appearance in her boudoir. It was not usual for visitors to be shown into this sanctum, and certainly it was the first time for some years that Ralph had entered it, but having decided to speak to his cousin on the subject nearest his heart, he had thought that delays would be dangerous, and had made up his mind to take the plunge as soon as possible. No great talent had been required to overcome the scruples of the waiting-maid on the subject of admitting him into his cousin's little sitting-room. In former years he had often spent whole afternoons there, and Ralph was popular in the household, the only persons who objected to him being Mr. Boulter and the pompous footman.

It is not necessary to describe in full the conversation which took place between the cousins. Mrs. Gore retired instantly, although Diana pressed her to stop. Ralph was about to pour

out a vehement declaration, and had already introduced the subject by what lawyers would term a "recital" of all the feelings he had cherished for his cousin ever since his boyish days. Diana, however, cut the story short by saying, "Ralph, there is no need to talk a lot of nonsense."

"But it is not nonsense," expostulated Ralph. "It is all quite true, and—."

"Never mind," interrupted Diana again, "I consider it nonsense. I don't want to listen to you to-day. You may tell me whatever you like next week, and then I will let you finish your story, but for to-day, I would rather not hear it."

"But Diana, dear, unless you know what I have to say—."

"I can guess pretty well, Ralph," Diana answered, "and I wish you were not going to say anything. At any rate, wait a week, or say ten days. If you still wish me to listen to you, then perhaps I will."

But Ralph was either too conscientious or too much in love to be so easily put off. He persisted, till out of sheer weariness Diana ceased interrupting him. It was some time before she replied to his peroration, which was: "Dear Diana, will you be my wife?"

She withdrew her hand which he had seized, and toyed with her fan. At last she said without betraying much emotion:—

"I am very sorry, dear Ralph, that you should have wasted so much affection on me. I do not deserve it."

"What does that matter, if I think you do?" exclaimed Ralph.

"I know I don't," retorted Diana. "I cannot answer you. You must wait."

"Will you give me some hope?" asked Ralph, taking her white hand within his own. "Darling Diana, you know there is no one in the world I can love except yourself."

"I cannot give you any hope," answered Diana. And all he could get from her was a promise to see him again ten days later. Until this, she said, she could give no decisive reply, but she

added, "I am afraid that my answer then will not please you any better than my answer to-day."

With this very doubtful success Ralph had to be content. His cousin's fair presence, her kindness of manner, which was apparent, although she had refused to accept his advances, her gentleness, the pressure of the hand with which she dismissed him, all had contributed to increase rather than diminish the ardour with which he prosecuted his suit. If on the previous night he had occasionally been tempted to consider the proposal to Diana rather in the light of a duty he owed to his uncle, he was to-day inclined to think that a rejection would be the greatest misfortune that could befall him. In her presence he forgot all his doubts and fears. His heart was so full of affection for her, so overflowing with admiration, that he felt sure of being able to make her so good a husband as to avoid all chance of those unpleasant consequences which in the watches of the previous night he had considered possible. He could not face another dinner at Branscombe Hall. He left a hurried note to his uncle, in which he informed him that he must go to town by the mail, but would return to carry out his promise very shortly. Nor did he ride over to the rectory in the mood of a rejected lover. He could not quite explain to himself why Diana wanted time to think it over, but he reasoned, "If she did not like me, and if she thought the thing quite out of the question, she would say so at once. She is not a girl to look half-a-dozen times at a place before she jumps it. I don't think she wanted to make my fall easier by putting it off. I believe that next week she will say 'Yes.'" This was Ralph's conclusion, and possibly the reasoning of a sanguine lover was nearer the truth than would have been that of a calm logician. Of the two, Diana was the more disturbed by the interview. When her cousin left, there was no opportunity for a fresh *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Gore. She was summoned to afternoon tea in the drawing-room, some neighbours dropped in, and she scarcely had time to think, before the dressing-bell rang. But while her maid was combing out the loose and massive black tresses which were somehow compressed into a small knot when

she rode to hounds, she recapitulated to herself the events of the afternoon, and with feminine sharpness, saw her way to make use of Ralph's offer without accepting it.

When the Colonel held the door open for the ladies to sweep out after dinner, she whispered as she passed him, "I want to see you in the conservatory."

The gallant Colonel was late at the rendezvous, for he delayed over his host's claret. He found Diana impatiently tapping her knee with her fan. She was sitting on a sofa in the well-warmed glass-house which adjoined the large drawing-room.

"You have kept me waiting a long time, Colonel Mannering," she said.

"I could not help it," he replied; "I could not get away from your uncle and Mr. Toms without attracting attention."

"I do not understand why you are so afraid of attracting attention, Colonel Mannering."

"Darling Diana," whispered the Colonel, sinking down on the sofa beside her and encircling her slender waist with his arm, "did not you promise to trust me?" and he endeavoured to kiss her soft cheek.

She withdrew and stood up, mechanically picking a camellia which she crushed in her taper fingers as she spoke.

"Yes, I did," she answered, "but circumstances have changed since Friday."

"How?" he asked, quickly, and looking startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she answered, slowly, "I mean that——" and she hesitated.

"What?" asked the Colonel again. "That you do not trust me any longer? Why?"

"No, it is not that," answered Diana; "I would trust you, though," she added, half bitterly, "I do not know why I should. But there are others who will not trust you,"—and again she hesitated, and, looking away, at last said, "Some one has proposed to me."

"Proposed! Who?" asked the Colonel, starting up. "Who has dared?"

"Well, why not, Colonel Mannering?" replied Diana, recovering her composure. "I do not think I am plainer than other girls, and I believe I have good expectations."

"But, who is it?" asked Mannering, almost imperiously. "And what did you say? Of course, you refused him!"

"No," replied Diana.

"You did not!" and Mannering threw himself down on the sofa, and hid his face in his hands. "What," he gasped, "you accepted this man within a few hours of promising to trust and believe in me?"

Diana was overcome by his apparent emotion. "No, Frank, dear," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder, "I did not accept him, but my uncle wishes it very much, and I did not absolutely say no. I asked for time."

"Who is it?" again inquired the Colonel, almost fiercely.

"Never mind who it is," replied Diana.

"Do you love him?" he asked, taking her hand and speaking again in his tenderest tones. "Can you love him, Diana?"

"Frank, how can you ask?" she answered. "Must you go to-morrow?"

"The sooner the better," he replied bitterly, "to get out of this fellow's way."

"How can you speak like that, Frank?" said the girl, in turn dropping back on the sofa from which the soldier had risen. "You make me thoroughly wretched."

"Not more than I am myself, Diana," he answered. "Who is this man? Is it your cousin?"

By this time Diana was almost unnerved. She had concealed her face in her handkerchief and did not answer.

Mannering went on. "It must be your cousin, that unlicked cub, a mere boy, quite incapable of understanding you or making you happy."

"I do not want to marry him," sobbed Diana.

"Then why not refuse him at once?" asked the Colonel.

"Because, don't you see, poor Uncle Henry is getting old and he wants to see us two married to——"

"To keep the property together," sneered the Colonel.

"I do not know," answered the girl, wiping away her tears and looking him straight in the face, "but at any rate it is my duty to do all I can to please my uncle, who has been so kind to me all my life."

"Oh, if you talk of duty—" said Mannering.

"I do not generally talk of duty," answered Diana, "and I know I have not done mine so far. But here is a good-hearted young man who wants to marry me, and my old uncle, to whom I owe everything, also urges me to it. What can I do? Advise me, help me!" she added, imploringly.

"I am afraid I cannot help you," answered Mannering, "if your own heart does not."

Diana bit her lip. "If I anger my uncle," she went on, "he might turn me out of the house. I should be penniless and homeless. I have not anything of my own."

"That is the worst of it," the Colonel said, *sotto voce*.

"And unless I please him he will not give me anything. What can I do?"

Colonel Mannering had become calmer during the last few minutes. He walked up and down silently, and then said, "I will think it over and tell you before I go to-morrow morning."

"Must you go?" Diana asked once more.

"I must, indeed, darling. One kiss before you go back to them."

Diana allowed him to press her lips with his moustache, and joined the rest of the party, while the Colonel strolled off to the smoking-room for a cigarette.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BAD COLD.



R A L P H rattled back to London in the mail train he bethought him of his aunt's note, and it struck him that a visit to Silverstone, tedious as it was likely to turn out, would be a means of diverting his thoughts from the engrossing subject of his cousin's answer. For Ralph was pre-eminently active-minded, and could not bear to waste time and thought on anything which could not thereby be advanced. His mind was generally occupied by matters of a practical nature, and he abhorred to dwell on mere speculation which could have no tangible result. So when his next day's work was completed he wrote a note, telling his aunt that if she pleased he would come down to Silverstone when the Indian mail was despatched, and stop with her until the next Monday. By return of post he received a warm reply, and at the appointed hour on Friday evening left the train at Silverstone station, and found his aunt's family equipage waiting to receive him. To his horror, when

entering the drawing room before dinner, he found the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson and a bearded gentleman, whom he at once put down as a foreign artist. The reverend lecturer seemed perfectly at home at Silverstone, and talked to the foreign gentleman in a patronizing way of the extent of the grounds and the conveniences of the house, a conversation to which Miss Nettlerash's entrance put an end. That lady greeted Ralph effusively, and then introduced him to Herr Katzenmusick. "Of course," she added, "you have heard of Herr Katzenmusick?"

"I am afraid ——," replied Ralph, "I do not go out much."

"Not heard of Herr Katzenmusick?" she asked, quite indignantly. "He is the greatest harpist of the century, and has played at a number of concerts with brilliant and well-deserved success. I hope we shall hear him after dinner."

The German bowed slightly, but appeared to take the compliments as a matter of course.

The spinster divided her attentions between the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson and the eminent German harpist. When she talked to the latter the reverend gentleman glared at him through his spectacles, and attempted to cut into the conversation at every opportunity. As soon as he had succeeded in establishing question and answer between himself and his elderly hostess, Herr Katzenmusick in his turn would attempt to divert her attention by asking in a loud voice whether she had heard so-and-so on the violin, or had been to some one else's concert. At dinner the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson was on her right and the harpist on her left. To Ralph was assigned the bottom of the table, and his neighbours were Marian and her governess, both of whom generally shared his aunt's meals. The conversation between the three at the other end was so absorbing and so loud, in consequence of the violent attempts each made to attract Miss Nettlerash's attention, that Ralph had not a chance of finding out what the real object of the invitation had been. He would not have discovered it all the evening if Marian had not herself told him that she had taken to riding, and that Miss Nettlerash had been good enough to buy a pony for her.

"Such a dear, beautiful pony," she added, "but he has got a bad cold, and Miss Nettlerash wants you to look at him. She sent for a horse doctor, a veterinary surgeon I think they call him, and he said he was afraid that he could not cure the pony. I am dreadfully sorry," added the girl, "because he is so very nice and pleasant to ride. I never had a pony before in my life, and I don't want to lose him."

"But my Aunt Janet talked of buying a horse," said Ralph.

"Oh, yes," replied Marian, "I know she is very kind. She said if this one would not do you should look out for another for me. I should be very sorry to part with dear Raven, but I dare say you will tell us what is the matter with him."

Little by little Ralph drew out from the girl the whole history of the purchase. Before dinner was over he had pretty well made up his mind that the most guileless of ladies had been cheated by a clever coper. But of course he kept his opinion to himself. The two eminent men entirely occupied his aunt's attention until she retired. Passing out she said—

"Ralph, will you look after the two gentlemen? Mr. Dawson, I know, takes no wine, but I daresay you and Herr Katzenmusick will find something that you like."

Ralph noticed that when the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson heard Miss Nettlerash's assertion on his abstinence he made a grimace. But he was scarcely prepared to see the reverend gentleman fill up a bumper of port the moment the door was closed.

"It pleases the old cat," said Mr. Dawson, "but she is quite mistaken if she thinks a man can do without a glass of wine. You and I know better, don't we, Mr. Branscombe?"

And with these words he nudged Ralph in the ribs. Now no one was less tolerant of his aunt's special fancies than Ralph, but he detested the idea of anyone using them for his own advantage. He would have liked to call Mr. Dawson a hypocrite, but as he was in his aunt's house, and played, so to speak, the part of the host, he could only coldly incline his head and allow Mr. Dawson to help himself. The German, at any rate,

did not pretend to be a teetotaler. He drank freely, though not immoderately, but he could only manage one glass to the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson's two. It was a relief to Ralph when the elderly maid-servant (for Miss Nettlerash would not keep a man in the house) entered and announced that the gentlemen would find coffee in the drawing-room. In the drawing-room they found not only coffee, but a grand piano set open, with a harp by the side of it.

"Now," said Miss Nettlerash, "you shall have a treat. Herr Katzenmusick, what shall we begin with?"

Herr Katzenmusick looked as if he would rather not begin at all, as his audience was small, and not inclined to be appreciative. Herr Katzenmusick was above all unwilling to waste his sweetness on persons who would not advertise him nor praise him up to the skies. But board and lodgings and Miss Nettlerash's protection had to be paid for; so, disguising his unwillingness under a sweet smile, the bearded gentleman bowed and said, "Whatever Miss Nettlerash pleases."

There is no instrument more painful than the harp, unless the performer has extraordinary talent, and is accompanied in the most perfect manner. If these two elements are combined it is one of the sweetest and most beautiful. When they are not it is little short of torture to listen to it for very long. Now Miss Nettlerash's fingers had long lost the elasticity of youth, and Miss Nettlerash's eyes were not as strong as they used to be, so the result was that she sometimes read the right note, but touched the wrong one, and sometimes read the wrong one and touched it. Advancing years, too, did not improve her hearing powers, so that most of her false notes were not audible to herself. Bang, bang! she went on the piano, and strum, strum! went Herr Katzenmusick on the harp, amidst the respectful silence of the listeners. Mr. Mudbury Dawson dropped asleep in an arm-chair after several vain attempts to dislodge the enemy, while Ralph, pining for a smoke, sought consolation in a whispered talk with Marian, who pleased him with her *naïveté*, her intense gratitude to Miss Nettlerash, and her

anxiety to become an accomplished horsewoman. She told him of her studies, and showed him her drawings, and towards the end of the evening became so confidential as to admit that having seen the hounds twice or thrice pass through Silverstone, her greatest wish in life was to go out with them. Meanwhile the bang, bang ! and strum, strum ! went on almost uninterruptedly, the only pause being between the pieces, when Ralph almost unconsciously clapped his hands, and Marian frequently said, "How pretty ; how very lovely that piece is !" while the reverend gentleman murmured an unintelligible approval. Had it not been for Marian's pleasant prattle Ralph would have felt it impossible to sit out the evening. As it was, his nerves gradually became as tense as the harp-strings themselves, and every fibre seemed to be going strum, strum, with that instrument. At last the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson's snores became so audible as to arouse even Miss Nettlerash's attention. She left the piano, and saying, "Poor man, poor dear man, he is quite exhausted with his lectures," approached the sleeping clergyman, whose lower jaw had fallen, while his round nose gave forth stertorous snorts. She laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

"You are very tired, Mr. Dawson," she said. "Had you not better retire to your chamber?"

"Eh, what ?" gasped Mr. Dawson, waking up suddenly. When he became conscious of the situation he murmured, "Beg your pardon ; over-work ; fatigue ; too many lectures."

The bed-room candles were rung for, and Mr. Dawson was accompanied to the foot of the stairs by his kind hostess, while Herr Katzenmusick drew the cover over the harp, and Marian put the music in order.

"No smoke," thought Ralph, with a sigh—a sigh which he ventured to express audibly to the young girl.

"I can manage it for you," she said. "Only you must not tell."

"Of course not," Ralph replied.

"You may smoke in the school-room, may he not, Miss Jennings? Miss Nettlerash will never know. It is at the end

of the long passage, quite away from the house, and I daresay the fire is scarcely out yet."

Miss Jennings assented, for she had been governess in houses where the young men had considered smoking as necessary as eating. So, while Miss Nettlerash looked after the comforts of the somewhat dirty German, who admitted he would like a glass of beer before retiring, Ralph was conducted by Marian half-way up the stairs, where a door led into a long passage, at the end of which was a large chamber, formerly used as a billiard-room, and recently converted into a school-room for Marian's use. Both Miss Jennings and the little girl assured him that Miss Nettlerash scarcely ever entered this part of the house, and disappeared, leaving Ralph to his cigarette and his thoughts.

Next morning at breakfast Miss Nettlerash at last broached the subject of the pony, and told at full length the story of which our readers know both sides, while she only knew her own. The German, dirtier-looking in the morning than in the evening, was silent and cross. His rival declared himself on the sick list, and asked for a cup of tea in his room. Herr Katzenmusick became still grumpier when after breakfast Miss Nettlerash announced that she was going to show her nephew the stables. Perhaps he would like to practise in the drawing-room meanwhile? He preferred accompanying the party, though he did not know a horse from a donkey, and remained at a respectful distance outside the stable door for fear the animals should break loose and eat him. Ralph examined the pony as well as any one not a professional vet. could do. Raven looked a very nice beast in the stable. His legs were sound though rather knocked about, and his appearance left very little to be desired. There was no occasion to frighten the ladies by the well-known thumps which are supposed to tell whether a horse is sound in his wind or not. After a little time Ralph suggested that Marian should take a ride on Raven, while he would accompany her on one of the venerable carriage horses. Bingham at first strongly objected to this arrangement, but Ralph thought that in this case it was better to be diplomatic,

and took occasion to whisper to the coachman, "I will make it all right for you." In half an hour they started, first quietly on the road, then turning up a green lane a little faster, and finally, when they reached Horne Wood Common, at a sharp canter. The faster they went, the more the pony wheezed and coughed. His flanks heaved, and he showed every symptom of distress. There was no mistake about it, poor Raven was completely gone in his wind and absolutely incurable. To persevere in a gallop would have been mere cruelty. So Ralph pulled up and took his charge slowly home. As they rode up the drive "strum, strum," welcomed them from the house, and Ralph, feeling himself incapable of facing any more harp for the present, fled to the stables.

"That pony has got a very bad cold," he said to Mr. Bingham.

"I am afraid he has, sir," said Mr. Bingham, respectfully.

"I am afraid it will take a long time to cure," continued Ralph.

"I am afraid it will, sir," agreed Bingham. "Very sorry, sir, nothing the matter with the pony when he came."

"Very likely not," assented Ralph, "but he is very bad now."

"That he is, sir," Bingham agreed, glad to see that Ralph took the same view of the matter that his mistress did.

"Touched in his wind a little, I think," Ralph went on.

"I am afraid he is," replied the man sadly.

"Broken-winded," hazarded Ralph.

"Think so, sir?" answered Bingham.

"I do."

"I am afraid it is very likely, sir," continued Bingham dejectedly.

"No fault of yours, of course," added our hero, anxious to reassure the old man, although he knew perfectly well that Bingham had had some plunder out of the transaction.

"Glad you think so, sir," said the coachman, with the air of a man who sees his reputation re-established.

"Well, of course not," continued Ralph. "But Miss Nettle-rash had better get rid of the pony at once."

"I think she had, sir," assented Bingham jauntily, having quite recovered his spirits, and foreseeing another couple of sovereigns at least on the sale.

"And buy another," added Ralph, moving towards the house.

"Yes, sir, must buy another," Bingham agreed very cheerily, now seeing another ten pounds looming in the distance.

"And look here, Bingham," said Ralph, turning round just before entering the house, "*you* will sell that pony."

"If Miss Nettlerash pleases, yes, sir," answered Bingham cheerfully and respectfully.

"But," said Ralph, "I shall buy the other," and he nodded and disappeared.

Bingham stood looking at the door as it closed behind him.

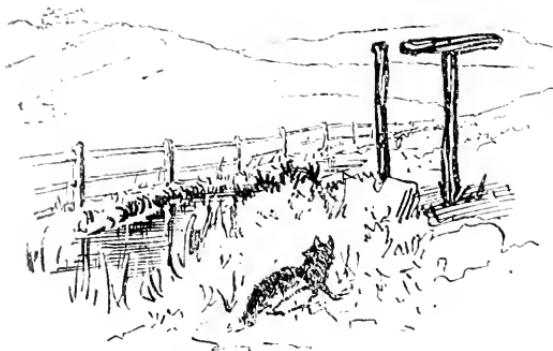
"Drat that young chap," he muttered, "he knows a darn sight too much. It ain't no use quarrelling with him anyhow. *I* shall sell the pony, that is one comfort."

He did so, for seven pounds. But Ralph bought another within the next few days—a sharp pleasant chestnut, with less show but more breeding than Raven. And though at first Marian was disappointed because his mane was hogged and his tail docked, she soon appreciated the new purchase at his true value, and was thankful to Ralph for having taken the trouble to find him for her.



CHAPTER XX.

CONGRATULATIONS.

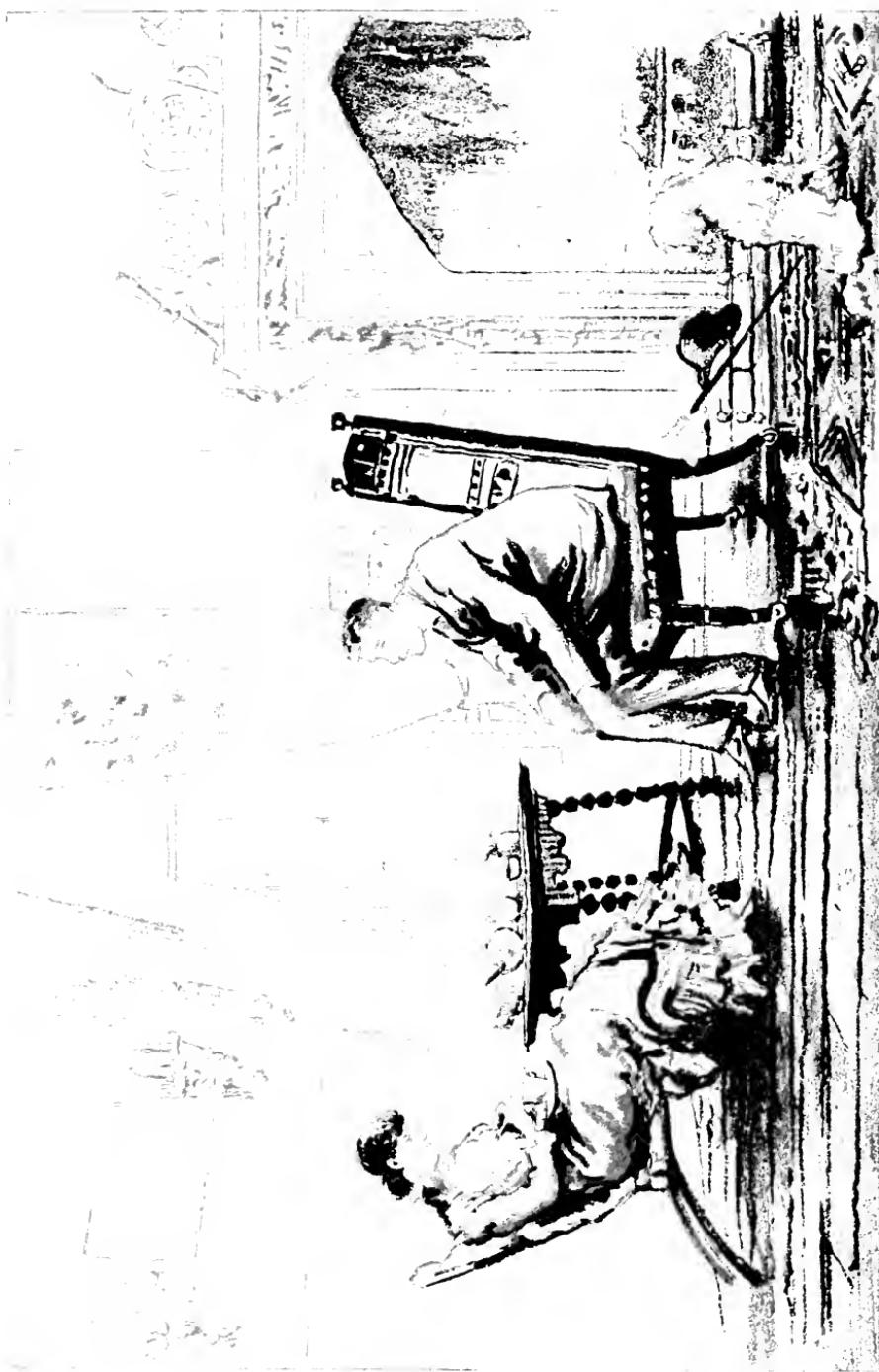


means the nearest station for Branscombe. The Hall was about four miles from Domington, and six from Chalford Junction. Both places were on the route from London to Warboro', but the fastest trains did not stop at either, so that Warboro' was occasionally used as most convenient, notwithstanding the long drive thence to Branscombe Hall. The two o'clock on Saturday, however, stopped at Chalford, where Ralph took a fly so as to reach his uncle's house before afternoon tea.

The anxiety with which he was looking forward to Diana's answer was not perhaps that which would be felt by an enthusiastic lover of the romantic school in the frame of mind normal to his condition. For such a man considers his mistress to be scarcely lower than the angels, and certainly without a fault. He looks forward to marriage with her as the gate to bliss, pure and unalloyed. Now, though Ralph had crossed his Rubicon, and though his admiration and affection for his cousin were as deep as they were sincere, yet, as we have already noted, he was neither blind nor deaf; and though his love inspired him with the hope of being able to cure

WAS not till the Saturday following that Ralph was at last able to get free, and his impatience would not allow him to go to Warboro' and thence to Branscombe Hall. Warboro' was by no

"Darling, that is impossible."



Diana of her flirting propensities, yet was that hope by no means very sanguine. And he was nervously uncomfortable with the consciousness that his engagement to Diana, if engagement there were, would cause a great many people to shrug their shoulders and a good many others to whisper, not quite inaudibly, behind his back: so that his frame of mind was not that of the ordinary hopeful lover—jubilant with anticipations of happiness; nor of the despairing one—wretched with the certainty of refusal. It varied greatly: occasionally he looked on the bright side only, and felt sure that Diana would be a sweet wife to him, and that he would make her so happy that she would not even dream of a flirtation. A few moments later he would abuse himself for a fool to marry a notorious coquette, who was sure to make him miserable if she did not disgrace him. When the fly drew up at the porch of Brancombe Hall he was in his sanguine mood, and at once made his way to his cousin's boudoir. She and Mrs. Gore were together, as on that Sunday: the latter slipped away directly after the usual greetings had passed. Ralph lost no time in coming to the point. "Dear Diana," he said, raising her hand and kissing it, "I have come for my answer."

The girl, who was paler than usual, betrayed no sign of emotion as she replied:—

"I felt sure you would soon come. But would it not be better to drop the question and forget that you asked it?"

"Darling, that is impossible," exclaimed Ralph, drawing his low chair close up to his cousin's. "You know I love you too much for that."

Diana sighed, thinking of Colonel Mannering's brief adieu on the doorstep. "Marry him," was all he had said, when he took leave.

"Ralph," she said at last, "it would not be fair for me to accept you. Do you really love me so much?"

"Listen," answered he, taking both her hands in his, and looking tenderly into her face; "ever since I was quite a baby I have never thought of any other girl but yourself; you were my

little treasure and my pet when I used to come home from Eton and bring you toys and bonbons ; you were my little darling when I was at Cambridge, and as you grew up so did my love for you grow. My heart has not been filled by schoolboy fancies or a freshman's flirtation. I have never cared about anyone else, and I do not suppose I ever shall. All that is possible to make you happy I will do ; I will be a true and fond husband to you if you will let me."

The impassive Diana was moved. "But Ralph," she said, "I *cannot* say I love you like that."

"I know you do not," cried Ralph, "but I will teach you."

"I am afraid you will not succeed," said Diana, gently.

"Diana," repeated he, "my love for you will make you return it, if—."

"If what ?" asked the girl when he stopped.

"If you do not love some one else. Tell me, do you ?"

What should she answer ? The truth, and plunge her cousin into despair, and anger her uncle, and possibly destroy her future ? Or deceive Ralph and make him a happy man now, even though he might be wretched later ? Besides, was it the truth ? Did she love Colonel Mannerling ? Had not the Colonel himself advised her, when he left Brancombe Hall, whispering those few words in the porch as he took leave ? Did she not rather hate him who had stolen into her heart so ruthlessly, to desert her and leave her to a rival, when he ought to have come forward to claim her hand ?

"Cannot you answer ?" asked Ralph, when she had been silent for a few moments, while these thoughts coursed through her brain and made her temples throb.

"I was thinking," she answered. "No, I do not love any one else."

"Then I am sure, quite sure of making you love me some day, as warmly as I love you, darling," cried Ralph, clasping her in his arms, and kissing her cold lips passionately. "May I tell Uncle Henry that you consent ?"

"If you wish it, Ralph," answered Diana, releasing herself.

And so it was settled. Sir Henry Branscombe, to whom Ralph made a brief but sufficient announcement before he joined his cousin in the drawing-room, scarcely looked as pleased as his nephew had expected. "Glad to hear it, my boy, glad to hear it," was all he said, shaking Ralph warmly by the hand. But then, instead of joining the party at tea as in old times, he remained in his "justice-room" staring into the fire, with one hand on the mantel-shelf and a foot on the fender. Ralph could not help noticing that he looked very ill, and his opinion was corroborated by Diana and Mrs. Gore. Both agreed that the old gentleman was extremely nervous about himself, depressed and irritable, and that he did not ride with half the zest nor the vigour he had displayed but a few weeks before.

Sir Henry was, however, quite well enough to remember what he ought to do under the circumstances. After dinner he informed his nephew that he proposed going up to town next day to see Messrs. Penner and Inkstone, the family solicitors, so that the necessary financial arrangements might at once be made. He also expressed a wish that the wedding should be as soon as possible, as he felt that his health was failing, and he should like to see them married before it entirely broke down. Ralph pooh-poohed the old gentleman's fears, but during the evening Sir Henry asked Diana how long she would require for her trousseau. This question involved a consultation with Mrs. Gore, and the girl pleaded for delay; but Sir Henry was so eager to have the day settled, and so nervous about any postponement, that it was fixed for the end of February, providing Ralph's father and mother raised no special objection.

Early next morning Ralph rode over to the rectory, while Sir Henry proceeded to town to instruct Messrs. Penner and Inkstone. The Rev. George Branscombe was already out at work in the parish, but Ralph found his mother at home, and she received the news with unconcealed pleasure.

"At last!" she exclaimed. "Well, I began to think that that giddy girl would go off with some foreign count or an officer without a penny beyond his pay. How much will she have

Ralph? But what is the use of asking? Of course you and she will have the whole of the Branscombe property between you. You're really luckier than you deserve, considering how long you have been making up your mind. A good thing that Colonel is got rid of. Don't you have him hanging about when you are married, Ralph?"

Mrs. Branscombe's congratulations did not make her son much happier. As to his sisters, they seemed to be so overwhelmed by the extraordinary nature of the intelligence, that they were struck dumb. Only little Mary remarked, "Diana going to marry *you*, Ralph? Why, I thought that she liked that tall black gentleman much better," for which she was duly snubbed by Regina.

When the Reverend George came in, Ralph met him at the gate, and led him into his snuggery.

"Father, I have come to tell you that I am engaged to Diana. With your approval we are to be married in February."

"Engaged to Diana? Are you serious?"

"I am indeed, father. I love her with all my heart."

"I am sorry to hear it, my boy," said the rector hastily.

"Sorry, father! is that all you have to say to me?"

"Not all I might say, dear boy, but the news surprises me. Of course I ought not to have said that I was sorry."

"But *are* you sorry?" asked Ralph. "Why?"

The rector tried to get over his indiscretion, but stumbled and blundered dreadfully in the attempt. "Well, I am astounded, I mean, and we shall be sorry to lose you."

"But you won't lose me, father; on the contrary, I am to give up Brown Hollands. I shall be at the Hall oftener than anywhere else, and I hope to see more of you."

The rector did not answer. His mobile lower lip and small chin were trembling. At last he said:—

"I hope you will be happy, Ralph; and I hope she will make you as good a wife as you deserve." Then he seized his son's hand and clasped it warmly.

"I shall try and make *her* happy," replied Ralph, adding

chivalrously, "and I only hope that I shall be as good a husband as *she* deserves."

"That I am sure you will," replied the rector, again pressing his son's hand. "God bless you, my boy; may He have led you right in this matter. That is all I pray for."

And the good man wiped away a tear which had furtively stolen down his cheek. He, too, had his doubts, and his congratulations were not more likely to make Ralph quite happy than those of the rest of the family.

That same day Ralph wrote a letter to Miss Nettlerash, to inform her of the happy event, and then returned to the Hall. It was not quite pleasant, a few hours later, to hear that Sir Henry had brought Mr. Throgmorton Toms from town with him. That little gentleman had, indeed, returned our hero his promissory note when Ralph sent him a cheque for two hundred, but he had not forgiven the scene at the Colonnade Club. A nobler nature than Mr. Throgmorton Toms' might have felt sore over such a snub; but the city man knew how to conceal his feelings. Greeting Ralph, as usual, with, "How do?" and extending five fingers to be grasped instead of three, for the engagement made him effusive, he said, "Glad to hear the news, Ralph. Now you don't want gold mines, eh? You've found one ready to hand, nearer than Utopia?" This with a chuckle, and in a low whisper. "Ah," he went on, louder, "this sort of thing makes one quite young again, don't it, Sir Henry?"

After dinner Mr. Toms took advantage of the old gentleman taking forty winks to tell Ralph, as if it were the pleasantest thing in the world, that "Mrs. Toms always said Diana would marry the Colonel, and was quite surprised to hear the news."

But all this was as nothing to the storm of the next day. Ralph had occasion to ride over to Warboro' again, and Diana consented to accompany him on a visit to her future parents. The rector's man-of-all-work having taken charge of their horses, the two walked unannounced into the drawing-room. There they found Miss Nettlerash walking up and down, gesticulating

excitedly, and talking in a loud voice. The words Ralph heard as he opened the door were :

“ How you can let him marry a girl like that, Maud ! A girl who has quite lost her character.”

It was too late to retreat. Ralph could only blush violently and hope that Diana had not heard his aunt. She suddenly stopped when she saw Ralph, but went on in a moment :

“ There he is ! I don’t care. *He*, at any rate, ought to listen to me, before——”

“ Certainly, Aunt Janet,” said Ralph, stepping forward and taking Diana’s hand. “ This is Miss Diana Branscombe, the young lady who has promised to marry me. I hope you will be as kind to her as you have been to me.”

Diana may or may not have heard the old lady’s observations. She looked paler than ever, but then her want of colour might have been caused by the excitement inevitably accompanying a visit like the present one. At any rate she bowed gracefully, and waited for Miss Nettlerash to take the next step.

That lady turned red and pale by turns, and glared all round. Mrs. Branscombe, however, rose to the occasion. Whatever her faults may have been, she was not likely to be taken aback by a social difficulty. She stepped forward, exclaiming :

“ My dearest Diana, I am so glad ! ” and folded the girl in her arms.

Then, seizing her by both hands, she said : “ You are dreadfully cold after your ride, dear. Let me take you to my room ; I am sure I can find you some warm clothes to put on instead of that riding habit all wet with the nasty fog.” And she whirled Diana off, leaving Miss Nettlerash and Ralph together.

“ I have just been giving your mother a piece of my mind, Ralph,” said the old lady. “ How she can be such a fool as to rejoice over this match is more than I can understand. And as to your father——. But then he always was an idiot.”

“ Aunt Janet,” exclaimed Ralph, “ I cannot allow you to talk in this way.”

"Allow me, indeed!" said Miss Nettlerash. "Why, I suppose I need not ask your leave to speak as I please. But it's no use arguing with *you*. Of course you're in love with the girl, and I might as well argue with a stuck pig. I don't blame you; men always make fools of themselves about girls, and the more the girls flirt the better you seem to like them. But your parents ought to know better. They are neglecting their duty shamefully."

"You must not abuse my parents, nor the lady I am going to marry," replied Ralph, indignantly. "Besides, I am of age, and did not ask their leave."

"I daresay not, you headstrong young fool," answered Miss Janet. "No doubt you did not do what you ought to have done, and did do what you ought not to have done. You'll be sorry for it by-and-by."

"I hope not, Aunt Janet," said Ralph, trying to control himself.

"I hope not, too," Miss Nettlerash went on; "but you will, for all our hoping. I may as well go now, before Miss Di. comes downstairs again."

"Is that all you have to say to me, aunt," asked Ralph, sadly, "when all my friends are congratulating me?"

"It is because I am really your friend that I don't congratulate you," replied Miss Nettlerash. "Mrs. Dawson and I were talking about that girl only last night."

"D——n Mrs. Dawson," muttered Ralph. And then, louder, "What business have people talking about her?"

"Everybody has been talking about her; that is the worst of it," retorted his aunt. "It is not people's fault, it's hers."

"They will have to stop their talk now, then," said Ralph, hotly.

"Do you think *you* can stop people talking, Ralph?" asked Miss Nettlerash, with some contempt. "Poor boy! Now help me on with my shawl, and tell me where I can go to change my boots. I always bring a dry pair with me," and with these words Miss Nettlerash lifted up her dress, and her black silk petticoat under it, and produced from the pocket of the woollen under-

petticoat a long narrow parcel which contained the dry boots in question.

Ralph led the old lady to his father's *sanctum*. "You will be undisturbed here," he said, half-way between anger and amusement; "my father is out."

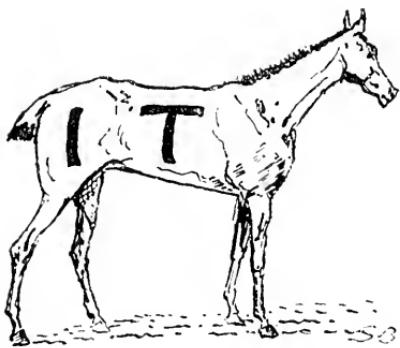
After some ten minutes Miss Nettlerash completed her toilet, Diana and Mrs. Brancombe not having yet reappeared, for, as Ralph guessed, his mother preferred keeping the girl upstairs till the coast was clear. The fly was summoned, and Miss Nettlerash said, before climbing into it:

"Good-bye, Ralph. I do really hope you will be happy, though I know it's no use hoping. I'm sorry for you, dear Ralph, very sorry." And before he knew what was going to happen, she threw her skinny arms round him and kissed him warmly. Then she was gone.



CHAPTER XXI.

A HAPPY COUPLE.



DID not take long to arrange matters with Messrs. Brown, Holland, & Co. Mr. Brown, senior, expressed his regrets at having to part with so promising an assistant as Ralph. Mr. Brown, junior, said, "Sorry you're going, old f'lla', but glad you're marrying money;" and Mr.

Holland shook hands warmly and told our hero that if he ever found himself on his beam-ends he knew where there was a billet for him and a knife and fork. It was understood that Ralph would, after the marriage, live at the Hall with his wife. But meanwhile it was arranged between them that the honey-moon should be prolonged into a Continental tour of three months at least. Ralph had never travelled beyond Paris, and Diana had not even crossed the Channel; so when the fortunate suitor suggested to the young lady that it would be a good idea to take a leisurely tour abroad, beginning with Naples and travelling quietly towards the north as the weather grew warmer, her eyes sparkled for the first time since their engagement. Ralph hated the idea of trying to "do" Italy in a fortnight, or the "grand tour" in twenty-eight days, and proposed stopping where they pleased and as long as they liked, unfettered by Cook's tickets or the necessity of being home by a certain date. This, too, was accepted by Diana, and to the hard work of preparing the trousseau in a hurry, and without the aid of a mother, was added that

of providing all the necessary luxuries for a prolonged journey. Thus during the days of their engagement Ralph saw but little of his bride, except when she was busy over choosing dresses, ordering cloaks, or selecting lace. He scarcely ever obtained a quarter of an hour in *tête-à-tête*, and when he did, Diana seemed preoccupied and cold. She let him kiss her cheek or her lips, but the cheek was cold as marble and the lips were irresponsive. There was nothing whatever he could justly find fault with. The Colonel seemed to have sunk below their horizon. Diana flirted with no one, and spent her time in the necessary preparations for the wedding. She went up to town and drove about shopping with Mrs. Gore or Mrs. Throgmorton Toms. She always received Ralph with a gentle smile, and never took any important decision without consulting him. And yet he was so unreasonable as not to be satisfied. There was something wanting, though Ralph could not have explained what she ought to have done, or what have left undone. As time went on, the wedding presents began to arrive, and to his great surprise, the most valuable of all came from Miss Janet Nettlerash. There was nothing with it except her card, but the present itself was incomparably the finest they received. Ralph suggested that Diana should write a note thanking his aunt. He then discovered for the first time that those unpleasant remarks had been overheard.

“No, Ralph,” she said, “I can’t forgive that woman for saying that I had lost my character. You may write and thank her if you like; I shall not.”

Ralph was rather of the same opinion, and yet he felt that he ought to do something; so he decided upon running down to Silverstone and thanking his aunt in person. He found the pony in excellent health, and Marian growing fonder of Abendigo daily—for that was the euphonious name the young lady had bestowed on her favourite. Miss Nettlerash was out to hear a lecture from Mr. Mudbury Dawson, at a neighbouring Mechanics’ Institute, so, in her absence, Marian and her governess received him. It was pretty to see how thoroughly attached the horse



"Over a couple of hurdles."

had become to its young owner. There was a joyous neigh the moment she entered the stable. Then Abendigo rushed to the door of his loose box and tried to push his little nose through the bars. When Marian opened it the pony's head was on her shoulder at once, and he followed her out into the yard like a dog. Nothing would do but that she should show her horsemanship, and Abendigo was quickly saddled while she put on a skirt. Then, Ralph being at the gate watching her, Marian took him round the paddock and over a couple of hurdles.

"Now, Mr. Branscombe," she said, pulling up close to him, "do you think I could go out with the hounds?"

"I should think so," replied Ralph; "but you often get more difficult jumps than those hurdles, if you want really to ride to hounds, and not merely canter down lanes."

"Oh, I quite know that," answered the girl, "and you have not seen all Abendigo can do. Just stand aside a minute, please."

Ralph did not know how she intended to show off, but was soon enlightened. Setting the pony's head straight for the gate she cantered at it, her little mouth tightly pursed up and with a look of determination in her eyes which meant business; a slight touch with the whip, and Abendigo bucked over the gate, which was almost as high as himself, and landed safely on the gravel drive.

"Will that do?" she asked Ralph, proudly.

"Very well, indeed," replied he, clapping his hands. "I will ask my aunt to let me take you out as soon as I have a chance."

"Oh!" said Marian, sadly, "that will be never. You are going to be married and we sha'n't see anything of you then."

"Why not?" asked he. "Must not married men ride to hounds?"

"That's not it," replied the girl; "but I think Miss Branscombe does not like Miss Janet, and I know Miss Janet does not like *her*."

"I am sorry to hear it," answered Ralph, gravely.

"So am I, if it vexes you," Marian went on; "I ought not to have said anything about it."

"Never mind, Marian; on the whole I prefer your being quite frank with me. But I hope my aunt will get over her prejudices when we are married. She and you must come and stay at Brancombe Hall."

"Never," answered the girl, looking away and flicking Abendigo's flank, so that he started off towards the stables. "Never."

Mr. Bingham had been on his good behaviour since Ralph's declaration about Raven. He felt that his tenure of office depended to some extent on the young man, and at the same time he quite understood that our hero had no intention of interfering in the weekly bills, as long as the horses were fit to go. Ralph had from the very first perceived that his aunt was being robbed. But he also saw that a maiden lady who knew nothing of horses was pretty sure to be robbed, and he therefore limited his efforts to taking care that she should have decent animals kept in good condition. A hint to Bingham on the subject of the poor appearance of the old greys was enough, and to-day when his aunt drove up the avenue he noticed how much better they looked. It was evident that they now had a chance of getting about half the corn charged for. In former times they were lucky if they got one-tenth.

Miss Nettlerash received her nephew with the remark that he had missed a treat by not hearing Mr. Dawson's lecture on the English language. "You really must come to hear that extraordinary man, Ralph. You cannot imagine how interesting he makes the most ordinary topics. I used to think that Mrs. Dawson was the cleverer of the two. But do you know, I have almost changed my mind; I really have."

Ralph was supremely indifferent as to whether the husband or the wife possessed the most talent, and at once thanked his aunt for her handsome present.

"I am glad you liked it, Ralph, and I only wish you had chosen some one else as your wife."

"My dear aunt," exclaimed Ralph, hotly, "if you speak like that I must send your present back."

"Don't be such a fool," answered Miss Nettlerash. "You ought to be glad I do not bear malice, instead of being offended at a very natural remark of mine. What does Miss Branscombe know of woman's work and woman's duties? How can I welcome as my niece a girl who has no idea of the proper sphere of a woman's activity, who has never read a decent book in her life, and whose whole thoughts are devoted to frivolity?"

"You wrong her, Aunt Janet," urged Ralph. "You should learn to know her, and you would find her much cleverer than you think."

"Fudge!" answered Miss Nettlerash. "But it's of no use talking to you *now*, I know that; I am not so silly as you think."

"Aunt!" expostulated Ralph.

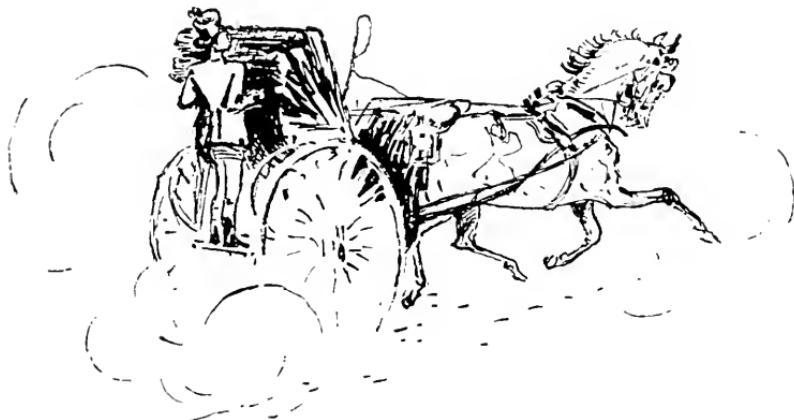
"Oh, yes, I know you all think me a silly old woman, your mother included, but wait a year or two and you'll admit I am right."

"I hope I never shall, Aunt Janet."

"So do I, Ralph."

And thus the conversation on the topic of the engagement ended. It was the last time Ralph saw his aunt before the wedding, which took place a fortnight later. Sir Henry Branscombe, whose cheques had flowed like water, was anxious for a very grand wedding indeed, and wished for a bishop at least to tie the bonds between his nephew and niece; but Diana succeeded at last in having her way, and her way was a very quiet one. The rector of Branscombe parish, assisted by the Reverend George, performed the ceremony, and no one was invited except near relations. Miss Nettlerash was asked, notwithstanding Diana's objection, but she declined to come. The day was fine, and nothing disturbed the proceedings except one trifling circumstance. Ralph fancied, as he walked up the aisle, that he saw a dark face peering out of the shadow of the little gallery by the organ—a face he remembered to have seen first at the covert

side, near Beech Grove. But this might have been only fancy, for when the happy bridegroom led his bride to the carriage which was to convey them to breakfast at the Hall, his anxious look all round failed to detect anyone but neighbours and friends. Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox pushed forward to shake hands with the happy bridegroom, and even Sir Henry buried the hatchet and accepted the proffered mutton-chop fist, a condescension which was rewarded by the Holborn Vale cards (green-and-gold) being thenceforth sent to him with a regularity which almost drove him wild.



CHAPTER XXII.

A TRIP ABROAD.

DURING the honeymoon, which was spent almost entirely at Naples and its neighbourhood, Ralph did not quite enjoy that unalloyed bliss which is supposed to be the special characteristic of this period. There was nothing, not even bad weather, to disturb their happiness, yet Ralph felt that it was incomplete. His wife was pleased with everything which was to both of them strange and new. She would spend hours in the Toledo, wandering about among the booths, and talking in broken Italian to the ragged beggars ; she was delighted to bargain for an hour with a picturesque rogue for an imitation tortoise-shell comb she did not want. She was overwhelmed and amazed in Pompeii, for she was fairly versed in classic literature, and every pavement, every fresco, reminded her of something she had read ; with Vesuvius she was fascinated, and disdaining the railway, insisted on ascending the mountain on foot on two occasions. There was not a drive nor a ride which did not open up to her some new beauties, and make some fresh suggestions on an impressionable mind. And Ralph sympathised with her in head and heart. But all these attractions, great as they were, did not make up to either, certainly not to both, for an unknown quantity which seemed wanting when they were in their hotel alone, and when they had sufficiently talked over the excursions of the day. At first Ralph willingly attributed her silence and pallor to fatigue or nervousness ; but when they had been away nearly a month, when there was no especial cause for either, the pallor and silence increased rather than diminished. She would reply to his anxious inquiries that there was nothing the matter, and would even appear a little irritated if he persisted in them. She would accept his caresses without any response. She did

not repel him, but she seemed unable to be more than friendly. Occasionally she would sit for an hour at the window, gazing over the glorious bay bathed in moonlight; and then her eyes would fill with tears, but if Ralph noticed them, they were hastily wiped away, and she assured him that she was not sad.

She was surrounded by every luxury Ralph could procure, and he lavished on her every attention his heart dictated. Sir Henry Brancombe had handed him a thousand pounds for their tour, and he was therefore unhampered by financial considerations. But the best carriages, the choicest dinners, the most beautiful flowers failed to please her more than just to extort an apparently forced smile. When he brought her a set of corals, which, as he said, would exactly suit her dark hair and her Italian complexion, she just said, "Thank you, Ralph, you are very good to me." When he refused an invitation to dine at a bachelor party on board the yacht of a friend he had run across, in order that he should not leave her alone the whole evening, she merely remarked: "It is a pity not to go, Ralph, instead of stopping at the stupid hotel." And when on this hint he procured boxes at all the theatres where anything amusing and intelligible was going on, she declared that she preferred remaining at home to listening to plays of which she only understood a portion. And as time went on, and the freshness of Naples wore off, her apathy increased, till Ralph suggested that as they had seen all that there was to be seen, they had better move northwards. This suggestion Diana accepted almost eagerly, and the next evening found them installed in excellent rooms at the Hotel Costanzi.

Meanwhile letters from home had arrived in due course. There were two short, rather shaky scrawls from Sir Henry, and about a fortnight after their departure Mrs. Gore wrote that she was about to leave the Hall. This had been previously arranged, as in fact there was now no reason for her remaining there permanently; but as it had been understood that she was to look after Sir Henry's household until the young couple returned, her sudden departure rather surprised them. Mrs. Gore was a

woman of extreme discretion, and was unlikely to compromise herself by any positive verbal assertion; still less would she write more than was absolutely necessary. Her letter informed them that circumstances had arisen which made it wise for her to leave at once; that Sir Henry's health was worse rather than better, and she was therefore rather anxious about him. But Mrs. Gore gave no explanation of those circumstances, merely mentioning in a postscript that Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton Toms had come down for a long visit.

"Regularly settled there, the little beast!" exclaimed Ralph, handing the letter back to Diana. "We shall have to get rid of them somehow when we are home."

"You seem to dislike Mr. Toms very much," remarked Diana. "What has he done to you?"

"Nothing," replied Ralph, "but I have very good reasons for disliking and mistrusting him."

"Tell me them," said Diana, with the curiosity of her sex and of a wife.

"I am sorry to say, dearest Diana, that the little rogue has bound me in honour not to tell of him. But you may depend upon it that I have very good reason indeed for what I say."

"Well, I cannot judge, of course, though I dare say you are right. I do not care about Mr. Toms myself. But I am very fond of his wife."

"A fashionable, worldly woman," said Ralph.

"A woman of the world," answered Diana, "and that is a very different thing. She is clever and pleasant, and was very kind to me."

"That is quite sufficient reason for me to like her, dearest," replied Ralph, "I will, in future. But don't you think, as I do, that the Toms have, between them, got rid of Mrs. Gore?"

"Why should they?" asked Diana. "She did them no harm. She was merely making herself useful at the Hall and saving them trouble."

"Ah! why?" echoed Ralph. He did not at once find an answer to the question. It puzzled him for some time, and he

had almost forgotten to be anxious about it, when they found fresh letters at Rome.

This time there was nothing from Sir Henry. Mrs. Toms wrote to Diana that the old gentleman was much in the same condition, nervous and anxious about himself, but not really ill. The Rev. George wrote to his son about the family and the parish, and merely mentioned that he had not seen Sir Henry lately, as on the last occasion of his riding over to Branscombe the old gentleman was said to be in town. So they concluded that he was no worse than when they left.

It was about a week after they had arrived at Rome. A lovely evening in March, such an evening as we, in our wet island, occasionally enjoy towards the end of May. They were in the garden of Monte Pincio listening to the band, and walking up and down among the merry crowd of people, Italians and strangers, who had come up out of the narrow streets of the city to breathe the pleasant spring air, and to inhale the perfume of the flowers. The sun had not yet sunk to the horizon, but behind the Castle of S. Elmo the sky was already glowing with the scarlet hues of evening. They stepped to the parapet of the terrace to look at the view, and watched the upper bends of the Tiber as they gradually borrowed the brightness of the sky, and contrasted with the blue mist which was rising over the flats of Trastevere. There was someone leaning over the balustrade close to them—a man clad in a dark suit. Hearing Ralph and Diana express their admiration he looked up sharply.

It was Colonel Mannering. There was a momentary hesitation on Ralph's part, a momentary blush on Diana's cheek. But the Colonel preserved his calmness perfectly.

“How do you do, Mr. Branscombe,” he said, raising his hat and shaking hands with Ralph first. “How are you, Mrs. Branscombe? I never expected to find you here.”

What a fortunate thing it is that those Divine judgments of which we sometimes read, and by which men and women are stricken dead on the spot for uttering a falsehood, do not occur very often. How unpleasant, for instance, it would have been

for the visitors to Monte Pincio if the handsome Englishman had fallen down lifeless in the crowd of smart, well-dressed people, bent on enjoying themselves! No such judgment occurred; big though the falsehood, it was apparently not a case for Divine intervention. Perhaps some allowance is made for people who can plead love as an excuse, just as the London magistrates take a lenient view of offences committed by drunken men, after carefully telling the prisoners that drunkenness is only an aggravating circumstance.

Any how, Ralph was so taken by surprise that he found himself shaking hands with Colonel Mannerling before he knew what he was about. Considering the circumstances afterwards, he came to the conclusion that even had he possessed the most perfect presence of mind, he would still have been obliged to shake hands with the Colonel. In another minute the latter was chattering away as if he had never made love to Diana in his life, and as if he and Ralph had been bosom friends.

“Where are you stopping?” he asked. “Ah! Costanzi: beautiful house, though it used to be rather feverish they say. I dare say you will keep clear of fever. Don’t stop out too late, take care to wrap yourselves up well, and don’t go into cold churches when you are hot. I’m at the old Rome; it’s a good place, though rather stuffy. How is Sir Henry?”

Scarcely had Ralph answered, when Colonel Mannerling rattled on:

“Almost time to move now, it’s late, and the mist is coming over. You must not get fever, you know. Let me help you on with your cloak.”

And he deftly placed the mantle round Diana’s shoulders. Somehow he always managed that sort of thing so much better than Ralph, who was inclined to be slightly clumsy. They moved towards the steps, the Colonel walking between them.

“Have you not seen the Pope yet? Oh, I know one of the cardinals, and can get you an audience in no time. Of course you must see his Holiness. A month at Naples? You must have been almost tired of it, for however beautiful, one gets

weary of the Bay after a certain time. Did you enjoy the oysters at Santa Lucia? What a pity! you should not have missed them. I am sorry that Sir Henry does not get any better; you should persuade him to come out to Italy for a change, it would set him up wonderfully, and make him ten years younger. Yes, I have three weeks' leave, and the first is nearly up. (I wish the third were, thought Ralph.) Is this your carriage? what a charming turn out! Thank you, I will call to-morrow."

All this might have been heard ten yards off, and was public property. But was not the Colonel rather longer than was absolutely necessary in helping Diana into the pretty pair-horse Victoria? And was there a pressure of the hand, and a whisper, which were by no means public property? The Colonel raised his hat, looked after the fast trotting little horses, smiled a gentle smile, and then swung into the Corso.



CHAPTER XXIII.

HOME AGAIN.



MANNERING became a frequent visitor at the Costanzi. It need

not be said that Ralph would, to use a vulgar phrase, sooner have had his room than his company, and was often considering various plans for getting rid of the unwelcome visitor. But this was by no means easy to effect; for there was nothing in the soldier's behaviour to which the most jealous husband could have objected; and Ralph, though suspicious of the Colonel, was far too honourable himself to mistrust his wife. He would not for the world allow her to suppose that her former lover's visits made him unhappy. He felt sure that if he had hinted at such a thing, Diana would at once have joined him in his efforts to keep Colonel Mannering at a distance. But he was too proud to show the slightest want of confidence in her; and such a hint would have implied a want of confidence. So the Colonel obtained for them an invitation to the Vatican (which, by-the-by, Ralph Braunscombe could probably have obtained just as easily himself), and accompanied them there in his full-dress uniform, contrasting strangely with Ralph's plain clothes. And the Colonel brought them special cards to visit old palaces not open to the general public; and

took them to queer *trattorie* in out of the way streets, where they ate real Roman dinners, and saw the Romans as they are at home, and not as they pretend to be when they know that *forestieri* are looking on. And most attractive of all to Diana, he procured for them a couple of very decent horses, so that they could go to a meet of the fox-hounds in the Campagna.

When Ralph was galloping across that generally sad plain, now bright in the sunlight of a Roman April, he was almost tempted to think that he had done Mannerling injustice, and that his suspicions were unfounded. On that delightful day Ralph noticed with pleasure that the Colonel took very little trouble about Diana—certainly no more than was justified by the common rules of politeness. When his horse dropped his fore-legs into one of the very nasty ditches which intersect that country, it was the Colonel who helped him out and on again, while Diana was galloping after the hounds. So when they took leave of each other on the Piazza Colonna, Ralph responded more warmly than he had done before to the Colonel's hand-shake. Yet in the solitude of his chamber he repented him of his confidence. "For," thought he, "the Colonel is certainly not particularly fond of me, nor of my company. It is for Diana's sake that he takes all this trouble; and he endeavours to keep well 'in' with me in order to be able to see her as often as he pleases." Yet was he forced to admit that the most scrupulous rules of propriety seemed to govern the Colonel's conduct. Not once had he called in Ralph's absence—at least as far as he could gather without interrogating the servants, a course he would have disdained to pursue. Besides, Ralph was so seldom absent, and then for so very short a time, that private visits to his wife would have been almost impossible. He had observed no whispering, no stealthy glances, no prolonged partings. Everything seemed plain and above-board. So Ralph began to think that it was on the whole just as well they had met the Colonel thus early. "All illusions have now passed away," he concluded; "she will settle down at

home quietly, without regrets and yearnings, and will in time begin to return my love more warmly."

The days sped on, and news from England became less and less frequent. Colonel Manning's leave had expired, and he left them just before the Easter holidays. Mrs. Throgmorton Toms still wrote occasionally, dating as before from Branscombe Hall, and informing them that Sir Henry was much the same. The Reverend George and Mrs. Branscombe each wrote one letter, in which they expressed some slight misgivings about the baronet's health ; but there was nothing alarming in their information. When the holidays were over (Easter being rather late that year), they travelled leisurely to Florence. Diana appeared less bored and less apathetic since the meeting with the Colonel ; nor did his departure depress her, as Ralph feared it would. The young man therefore rejoiced, although her improvement did not include any increase of affection towards himself. But she was undoubtedly in better spirits, less silent when they were at home, and more easily amused when they were abroad. The change to Florence seemed to revive her still more ; Rome was becoming close and relaxing, while at the more northern city they found cool breezes, and that bracing atmosphere which makes it perfection in spring though disagreeable in winter. There were several friends to be called upon, both at Florence and at the villas in the neighbourhood ; while dinners and drives occupied all the hours they could spare from the galleries, to which the mornings were devoted. Time flew on rapid wings for the young couple in the flowery Tuscan capital. English and cosmopolitan families welcomed them ; hospitalities were thrust upon them ; invitations to dinners and picnics, nay, even croquet parties (for lawn-tennis had not penetrated so far south) were rapidly increasing. A young and handsome woman, with a rich and pleasant husband, are acquisitions everywhere. A two days' trip to Vallombrosa was projected, and they were busy with the preparations for it, when the evening mail arrived, bringing several letters from England—one for Diana, two for Ralph.

That for Diana was from Mrs. Gore, who was stopping in a new situation at Worthing. It contained one passage only of any importance, which was to the effect that she heard very bad reports of Sir Henry Branscombe's health.

Ralph's first letter was from his mother. She said that as they had heard during the past month that Sir Henry was much worse, they had gone over twice from Warboro', but had not been allowed to see him. On the second occasion, Mrs. Toms had received them, "as if," Mrs. Branscombe said, "she were the mistress of the house. She told us that Sir Henry was not allowed to see any one; that the doctors had prescribed absolute quiet, though there was not much the matter. I asked Dr. Quayle about him," added Ralph's mother, "and he said he had not been called in to the Hall for months. Your uncle has some London doctor recommended, I believe, by Mrs. Toms. That woman, Ralph, is a *snake*, and the sooner you come home the better."

The other letter was from Messrs. Penner & Inkstone, and being very short, may be transcribed in full. It was marked private, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR SIR,

"As the family solicitors, we think it our duty to inform you that we understand Sir Henry Branscombe to be in a very precarious condition of health. No member of our firm has seen him since your marriage. We understand that he has more than once sent for Messrs. Pickum, Bones, & Co., to whom, by his special desire, we have handed a number of leases and other documents.

"We are, dear Sir, &c., &c."

"Pickum, Bones, & Co.!" exclaimed Ralph, after reading this note. "Why, they are the rascally fellows that were concerned in the Eldorado Gold Mining Co., and probably they are Toms' lawyers as well. We must go home at once, Diana!"

"We must indeed, Ralph," assented his wife, after reading Mrs. Branscombe's letter. "I am very anxious about Uncle Henry."

"When can you be ready?" inquired Ralph.

"As soon as you like," she replied; "for the evening train, if you can manage it."

So it was decided; and twelve hours later they were speeding along to Pisa as fast as an Italian express would carry them. They chose the route via Spezzia and Turin, and reached Branscombe Hall in three days. It was Ralph's particular wish not to give any warning of their arrival to the people at the Hall until they landed in England; no telegram was therefore sent until they reached Dover, in the early morning of the last day of May. Diana was now as eager as her husband to find out what the Toms couple were doing, for she was jealous of her uncle's affection, and would not easily allow herself to be displaced by a stranger. Ralph had telegraphed from Paris to Mr. Penner, and that gentleman met them at Charing Cross, though it was so early.

In a few minutes our hero was put in possession of the facts, which were but scanty. Mr. Throgmorton Toms had, it seems, a proper power of attorney from Sir Henry; and the latter had, by a letter dated the 7th of April, requested Messrs. Penner & Inkstone to hand certain important papers to the other lawyers. Since then, they had only heard indirectly from the Hall, and it was on the information of the baronet's serious illness that they had written.

The short journey to Branscombe scarcely gave Ralph sufficient time to mature his plans. He prepared himself for the most determined and violent fight. He felt sure that Mr. Toms had taken advantage of Sir Henry's illness and comparative isolation to obtain from him every instrument necessary for plundering him. Knowing that the little man and his wife had entirely settled at the Hall, he concluded that they would not give up their post of vantage, even in favour of himself, and would endeavour to keep their hold of everything as long as they

possibly could. It was therefore with no small surprise that he recognised Mrs. Throgmorton Toms on the platform of the Chalford Station, and saw that lady rush to embrace Diana as if she had been her beloved sister.

“So glad you have come back, dearest Diana!” she exclaimed; “such a relief! I did not like to make you uneasy about Sir Henry. But I am delighted you have come back. No one can look after him as well as you can! And Ralph, too, is sadly wanted on business matters. But we had not the heart to spoil your delightful trip. How well you look, Di! and how brown Ralph is. I declare he is better looking than ever.”

Thus talking she led them to the old-fashioned barouche, which was waiting at the station, while a cart had been sent for their luggage. Their breath was almost taken away by the lady’s affectionate volubility. But Ralph reserved his anger for her husband, who, she said, had gone to town for the day, but would return in time for dinner.

They, of course, at once asked to see Sir Henry; and, to their surprise, no difficulty was raised, although they were recommended to be very quiet. They found the old gentleman dressed, and sitting in his own favourite arm-chair; but, alas! what a change was there in his appearance. Those once ruddy cheeks were now sunken and yellow; the blue eyes, once so bright and frank, glanced weakly and suspiciously from hollow orbits; the hand which had mastered the most restive four-year-old was flaccid and tremulous; the lips, whilom firmly compressed, were now half-open and flabby; the voice, but recently deep and sonorous, was but a sickly quaver.

“Is that Ralph?” he asked, glancing at his nephew almost furtively; and then starting as Diana stooped to kiss his withered cheek. “Oh, yes; Ralph and Diana! Are you going to stop here? Very well; tell them to give you the green room,—no, the blue room. I’m not at all well. Ralph, you must not trouble me now; and don’t disturb me. It makes me worse. Where is Peebles?”

"Here, Sir Henry," said his valet, stepping forward.

"Peebles, give me my draft. Peebles, send for Boulter. I will ride the Duke to-morrow. Tithebarn, is it not?"

Thus the poor old gentleman talked of hunting the next day, while he had not strength to raise himself in his chair. And yet five minutes later he said that he was very bad, and would die soon, and did not want to be disturbed about business. His mind had given way; no doctor was required to tell Ralph that much, though Mr. Throgmorton Toms confirmed it in the evening.

The young people were appalled, and overwhelmed Mrs. Toms with reproaches for not having sent for them sooner. That lady excused herself on the grounds that they had had the very best advice in England, that their presence could have done no good, that she was unwilling to disturb their wedding trip. In short, she made out a very fair case; and when her husband came back, Ralph found that he had made his plans for a battle where there was no enemy.

"You see how he is now, Ralph. He takes the most unaccountable dislikes to people; and he took a dislike to Inkstone a few days after you left. He would not hear of their being sent for; he wanted other lawyers, and chose Pickum, Bones, & Co. himself, out of a list of a dozen I gave him. Of course, when I found out that his mind was going, and that that old fool Quayle made nothing of it, I sent for Sir Davenport Harley from town. I could not do better, could I?"

Ralph admitted that Sir Davenport Harley was quite the best authority on all complaints of this description.

"Well, Sir Davenport said it was incipient softening of the brain, but that it would probably last for years. I was bound to look after his interests, so I got a power of attorney before it was too late. You shall see exactly all I have done; we will go through the papers to-morrow morning. Of course, I have been carrying on things here at a great disadvantage, for I know nothing of the estate; and I'm devilish glad you've come to take it off my hands. As to the City matters, when I

have explained them, I suppose I may as well continue the process of winding up and closing accounts, for I know all about them, and you don't."

And in fact next day when Ralph went through the papers, he admitted that Mr. Toms had done his best for the estate in his absence. As to the City business, when that acute gentleman had talked for two hours, he became quite confused, and gave up the job as hopeless. But he took charge of the land from the very day, and acted as his uncle's representative.



CHAPTER XXIV.

TOWN.



SOON after the return of the young couple Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton Toms left for town, where the lady was very anxious to enjoy what remained of the season, and early in July Ralph also resolved to take his wife to London for a few weeks. Careful and constant attention had confirmed Sir Davenport Harley's opinion, that no immediate change was to be anticipated in Sir Henry Branscombe's condition. He scarcely recognised anybody now, and was incapable even of the small amount of reasoning he had been able to exercise when they first returned. On the other hand, his physical condition grew better rather than worse, and the absolute rest of the once so active brain actually appeared to give the body a chance it had not had for years. But under these circumstances it became necessary that certain legal formalities should be accomplished which would enable the Rev. George Branscombe, Ralph, and Mr. Throgmorton Toms to protect the property and make the necessary payments.

Ralph and Diana therefore took up their quarters at the Bristol, while the Rev. George and Mrs. Branscombe moved over to the Hall to look after the invalid in their absence. When Ralph fairly plunged into the various City matters which his uncle had undertaken, and of which Mr. Throgmorton

Toms held the strings, he gradually acquired the conviction that his first suspicions had not been unfounded. Mr. Toms had succeeded in complicating matters to such an extent that it appeared almost impossible to unravel them. Sir Henry had advanced money on mortgage of various leaseholds, and of sundry industrial tools and plant. The deeds were declared by Messrs. Pickum and Bones to be in perfect order. On the other hand, he had, almost immediately after Ralph's marriage, borrowed certain sums on the security of the Branscombe estates, and neither Mr. Toms nor the lawyers could give any information as to what had become of the money. The securities in which he had invested, though the deeds might be drawn in the most approved fashion, were impossible to realise immediately. In no case could the money advanced be got back without much delay and infinite trouble, and in many cases Ralph thought there was much doubt whether it could ever be got back at all, though Mr. Throgmorton Toms assured him that every investment was "safe as the bank." Practically, however, there were so many complications, in the shape of assignments and reassignments, and so many possibilities of bringing down apparently prosperous firms by demanding the money back, that Ralph and his own legal friends could not help wondering, time after time, why Sir Henry had plunged into all these difficulties, which a man of his business capabilities must have more or less foreseen. Some of the loans were as recent as the previous spring—nearly all were made within the past twelve months. And no one seemed able to explain why Sir Henry had suddenly encumbered property which he had spent years of activity in clearing. So Ralph came to the conclusion that the investments and the loans were all carried out under the direct advice and influence of Mr. Toms. Wishing as he did to return as soon as possible to the Hall, and yet determined—to Mr. Throgmorton Toms' secret vexation—to see his way clear in these matters before leaving London, Ralph was fully occupied, and left Diana a good deal to herself and Mrs. Toms, who drove her about everywhere, and took her to all the fashion-

able afternoon entertainments which were still going on. It did not surprise our hero to find Colonel Mannering's card at the hotel one evening when he returned from the City, but it would not be correct to say that he was much pleased at that gallant officer's attention. Still less delighted was he when, a few days later, he found the Colonel having afternoon tea with Diana in their comfortable sitting-room overlooking Burlington Street. Unpleasant as it was to touch on the subject, he made up his mind at once to speak, and the moment the Colonel, who was evidently fishing to be asked to dinner, had left the room, he said :

“Di, darling, I think you must be careful about Colonel Mannering. Don't have him here too often, please.”

“He has only been here once before, and then I was out,” answered Diana, rather warmly.

“I know, my dearest child ; and I also know perfectly well that there is nothing in it, except an afternoon visit. But people will talk, you know ! We are in an hotel where a dozen pair of eyes are always on the watch, and a dozen brains ready to invent scandal. Don't give them a chance, Diana ; please don't.”

And he drew her to him and kissed her tenderly. Then he went on :

“Just discourage his visits, that's all. Don't be ‘at home’ next time he comes ; and if we don't ask him to dinner, nor to go with us anywhere, he will drop it soon enough.”

Diana shot a glance of her deep black eyes at him which might have implied either indignation or surprise. She opened her lips as if to speak, but appeared to think better of it. After a few moments' silence she said :

“Very well, Ralph. It is time for me to go and dress now. Remember we are going to the Lyceum.”

Ralph thought he had said enough, and had still sufficient confidence in his wife to feel certain that she would allow Colonel Mannering to understand that his visits had better cease. Shortly afterwards, coming home one afternoon, he ran against Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox in St. James's Street.

No one could handle a horse better than Mr. Snuffbox; the most restive were quiet under him, and hunters sold for jibbing and refusing took their fences boldly when he steered them. So justly celebrated was he in this respect, that he obtained more than one invitation to "good houses" on the strength of it, and was able to talk of Lord Strangles having given him a mount, or of Sir Wruffe Wryder having asked him down to Wryder Hall, as if he were habitually on the most intimate terms with the nobility and landed gentry of England. Men who were unacquainted with his special talents opened their eyes wide when they heard his tales, and disbelieved them, but those who knew him better vouch'd for his truthfulness, and were aware that Snuffbox paid for the hospitality extended to him by breaking-in refractory ones, teaching keen hunters to carry ladies, "making" park hacks out of unbroken colts, and generally exercising that gift of bending horses to his will, which but few can acquire and still fewer are born with. In regard to horseflesh he possessed wonderful judgment and an inexplicable delicacy of perception. But as a man of the world he was, to use a favourite phrase of his own, "not in it." He blundered and stumbled whenever there was a chance, and came to grief almost every time he opened his mouth.

This Tuesday was no exception to the rule.

"Mr. Ralph!" he exclaimed, "glad to see you, sir. Hope Sir Henry is better," and he held out his red, ungloved fist, which Ralph at once grasped.

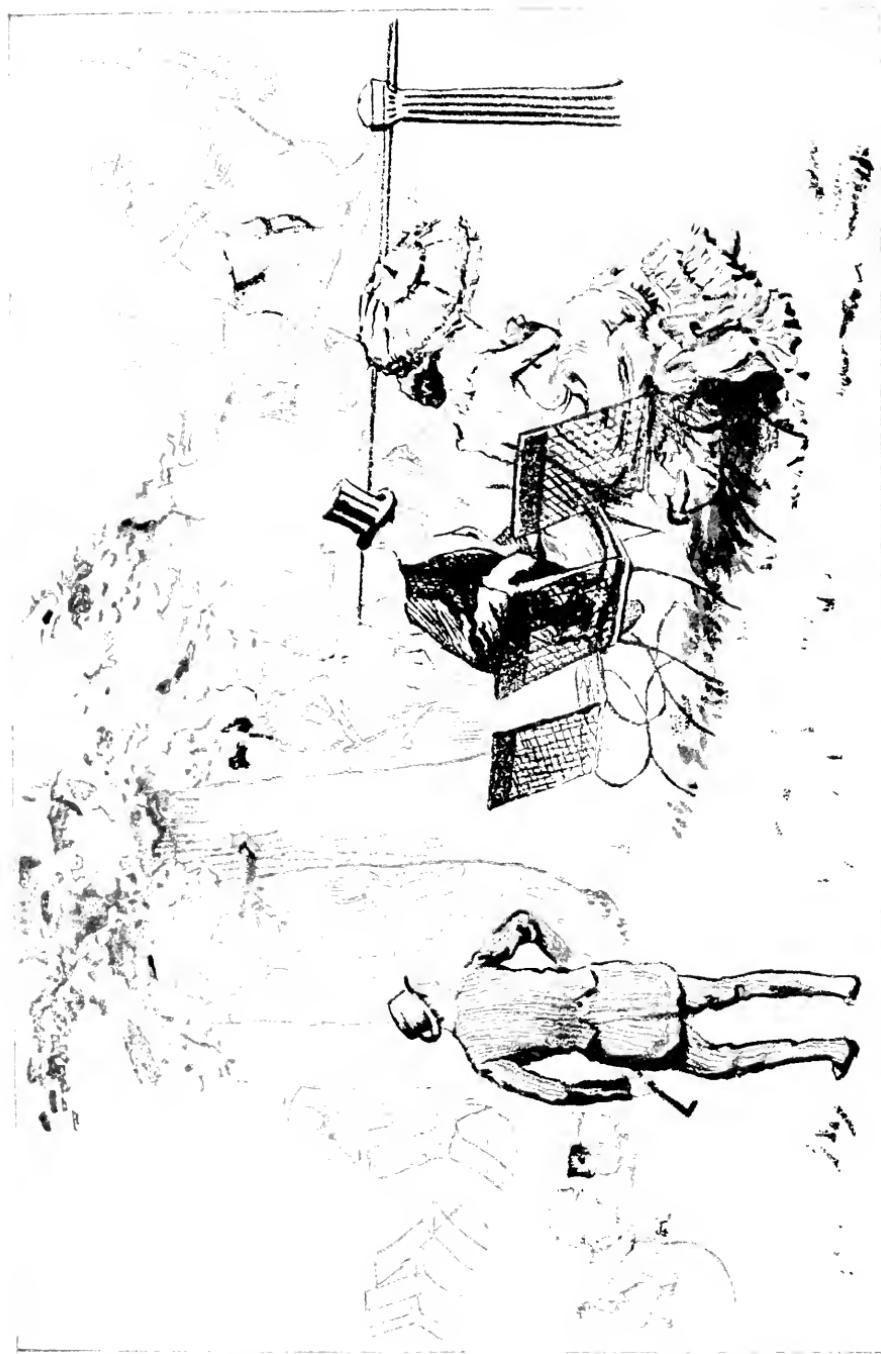
"My uncle is much the same, I am afraid."

"I suppose we shall never see the old gentleman out again," Snuffbox went on, taking of course the worst view of things. "I thought you was in London, Mr. Ralph," and he winked slyly.

"Why?" asked Ralph, innocently.

"Well, sir, I was in the Park this morning, looking at the swells, and I saw Miss Diana—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Branscombe—a setting in a chair next to that soldier chap that used to hang after her last season. And so I sez to myself, sez I, Mr. Ralph is sure to be about somewhere. Eh?"

And I saw Miss Diane."



Ralph bit his lip. He had been in the City all day.

“Oh yes,” he answered, “I was close to them. I suppose you did not see me.”

“No,” said Snuffbox, “I looked about, but missed you, somehow.”

It was not easy to exercise the self-control the occasion required. Ralph, however, mastered himself sufficiently to take Mr. Snuffbox into his club and offer him a glass of sherry and bitters. It need not be remarked that the offer was warmly accepted, and at last, to Ralph’s relief, his friend walked off behind the biggest cigar the Whitefriars’ Club could produce.

Diana was waiting for him at the Bristol, ready for a drive to Richmond, where they were to dine. Ralph was silent and pre-occupied, but his wife had never studied his moods, and apparently took no notice. At last he mustered courage to ask, in as indifferent a tone as he could assume—

“Were you in the Park to-day, Diana?”

“Yes,” she said, “I went for half-an-hour’s walk with Mrs. Toms.”

“See anybody you knew?” he went on.

“Well, only the Mortons and Lady Cheveleigh. Nobody else particular. People are going away fast. Town will be quite empty next week.”

There was a merry party at the Star and Garter that evening. Ralph endeavoured to appear as merry as the rest. But for the first time since his marriage he began to be seriously uneasy. And it was long before sleep closed his weary eyes on that Tuesday night.

There was a very heavy day with the lawyers on the Thursday following, and in the afternoon a question arose on which Mr. Throgmorton Toms’ opinion was indispensable. He had already left the City when Ralph sought him at his office, and the clerks said he had gone home. It was necessary, if possible; to see him at once, as the lawyers required a reply by the next morning at latest, and Ralph’s evening was engaged. He therefore proceeded to Chesham Place, where he was informed that Mr.

Toms had not yet come home, though he was expected shortly. The servant said :

“ Mrs. Branscombe is in the drawing-room, sir, with Mrs. Throgmorton Toms. Will you step upstairs.”

For several reasons Ralph did not wish to join the ladies. In the first place, he liked Mrs. Toms less and less every day. Secondly, he was unwilling to lose the thread of the business in hand, which was as usual, very complicated. He did not wish to have to make conversation and thus divert his thoughts. And, lastly, he was sufficiently vain not to want to appear in a lady’s drawing-room in his present condition, hot, dusty, and untidy from a long summer’s day spent in walking about London and in black offices.

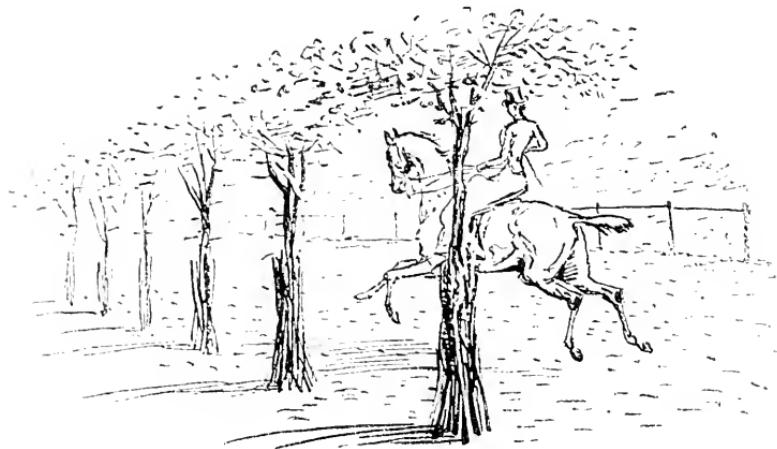
So he said, “ No ; can I wait for your master downstairs ? I only want to see him on business, and you need not tell the ladies I am here.”

To Ralph’s intense surprise, the man winked. Actually winked, and smiled a smile as if of intelligence. He was fairly puzzled at this extraordinary conduct of an otherwise unimpeachable London footman. However, he was shown into the front room on the ground floor, which was Mr. Throgmorton Toms’ library. The lower part of the windows to the street was aesthetically constructed of lead lattices, with coloured glass. You could see from inside outwards, but not from outside into the room. Ralph pulled some papers out of his pocket, and glanced through them to refresh his memory. Then he looked out of the window mechanically, while thinking over the facts of the case and the footman’s wink. He was aroused from his reverie by hearing the front door open and shut. There had been no ring, so some one in the house must be going out. He raised his eyes to the street and saw Diana and Colonel Manning pass the window towards Belgrave Square, in close conversation.

Now he understood why the flunkey winked.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN EXPLANATION.



WHEN Ralph at last had his talk with Mr. Throgmorton Toms, that gentleman said to himself that after all he had overrated the young man's talents. He asked such foolish questions, and seemed to understand Mr. Toms' replies with so much difficulty, that the financier stared at him more than once in surprise, scarcely recognising in him the same person whose pertinent questions and searching inquiries had hitherto so much disturbed his private operations. Ralph felt that he had lost his grasp of the matter, alleged a head-ache, and took a turn in the park to recover his equanimity. What should he do? What should he say? Ought he to have followed them at once to watch them? For a moment that had been his impulse. But it would have been difficult to watch them to any purpose; and besides, such a step was utterly repugnant to him. Yet things could not be allowed to go on thus. There must be an explanation; and the explanation must put an end,

once for all, to Diana's flirtation with the handsome Colonel, or—what?

Ralph could not face the alternative. He did not believe for a moment that his wife could be false; and was still sure, so he argued to himself, that if he put the matter fairly before her, she would give up her thoughtless conduct. So he determined to act on his conviction at once.

Diana was sitting quietly reading the last new novel.

"Good evening, dear," he said, as he entered. "Tell me, do you often meet Colonel Mannerling at Mrs. Toms'?"

"What do you mean?" asked she, flushing violently.

"Now, Diana darling," he said, sitting down on a low chair before her, and taking her hands. "Listen to me, and do not be angry."

"I do not want to be lectured," said his wife, pettishly, recovering her natural colour, and attempting to withdraw her hands.

"I have no intention of lecturing you," he continued, very seriously; "but you *must* listen, darling. You know I love you above everything on earth, don't you?"

"Supposing you do?" asked Diana. "What about it? You have told me so often enough."

Ralph was determined to go on patiently. "Well, my dearest Di, think for a moment of what you are doing. Stop!" he cried, holding up his hand, as he saw that she was about to speak. "Do not interrupt me. God forbid that I should accuse you of anything more serious than thoughtlessness. If I did not hold you to be my good wife, loving me perhaps less passionately than I love you, but still affectionate and true and brave, would I speak to you thus?" And he took her hand again, and kissed it, while she became paler, and her large eyes looked into his face with an anxious expression.

"Darling," he went on, "I believe in you, and hope that some day you will love me as I love you. And because I believe in you I must warn you. I do not know how often you

have met Colonel Mannerling in the Park, or at Mrs. Toms'——”

“Only once or twice,” she interrupted, casting her eyes down. “And to-day he only saw me into a hansom, and I drove straight home.”

“All the better,” answered Ralph. “But, my dearest, that once or twice was too much. The Colonel was fond of you before we married. I believe him to be still attached to you. Perhaps he has told you so?”

Diana started. But Ralph went on :

“Anyhow, it is imprudent of you to meet him ; imprudent of you to give him opportunities of seeing you. It can only lead to scandal and misery. Again I tell you that I believe in you, and hold you to be good and true ; but you must be above suspicion, and you must not run into danger. For your own sake, dearest Diana, if not for mine, for the sake of our poor old uncle, for the sake of the good family name, be warned, my love, and let me shield you from the faintest breath of scandal !”

He kissed her cold lips, while silent tears coursed down her checks, which he rejoiced to see ; though he, too, had to choke down a sob.

“Darling,” he said, rising, “you will be warned, will you not ? You will be more prudent in future ? Promise !”

“I will try,” she answered. “Let me go now, Ralph dear !”

Ralph’s hopes revived when he saw how deeply moved she was, for one so difficult to move as Diana. But he determined to leave town at once, whatever business might stand in the way. The suggestion of Goodwood, which he made at dinner, brought back the smiles to his wife’s face ; and next day he told the lawyers that they would have to get on without him for a week. So the next Saturday found them installed in a tiny cottage at Lavant, which he had bribed a club friend to give up to him. The beautiful Sussex lanes, and the rich foliage of the hanging woods never looked

more attractive, nor the bright sea in the distance more sparkling. Diana seemed almost loving; at any rate, she was grateful for his gentle forbearance; and Ralph had probably never spent a happier week than in that cottage on the South Downs. The repose of their rose-covered dwelling was delightful, even to the pleasure-loving Diana, after the crowd and bustle of the race-course; and both were happy in their selection of favourites—a circumstance which materially helped to make the days pass pleasantly. No shadow came between them, and no reminder of the gallant Colonel disturbed Ralph's peace.

Then they went back to Brancombe Hall, where there was much to do and much to think of; though its quiet was scarcely so pleasing to Diana as to her husband. The weeks went on, and the leaves began to change colour, but there was no change in Sir Henry. His condition, of course, prevented their inviting people down to the Hall to shoot, and even Diana seemed to admit that it was better to do without Mr. and Mrs. Toms. Mrs. Gore spent a fortnight with them; and a few neighbours made up shooting parties in September. Then Ralph began to think of horses. There were Sir Henry's in the stable, all fit to go; and there was dear old Peabody, and Diana's thoroughbred; so no new purchases were wanted, though Ralph had, at first, some scruples about riding his uncle's. These, however, were overruled by his friends, and he therefore began the campaign horsed in a manner which was as unusual for him as it was delightful. It was the first time in his life that Ralph had been able to look forward to a winter's sport without the black care of financial fears to worry him. Anxiety about a hunter's legs was now confined to anxiety about that particular hunter. If Peabody were not fit to go he would be sorry, because Peabody was his favourite; but there were Peterborough and Black Swan, and half-a-dozen more to fall back upon, and no difficulty about paying the cornchandler's bill loomed in the distance. The renowned Boulter had become humble and respectful. He had bullied Mr. Throgmorton Toms

thoroughly as long as Ralph was abroad, but as soon as the young man returned, the financier gave up the stables with a sigh of relief, for there was no money to be made out of them, and he did not care about horses. Boulter would have been discharged at once had not Diana interceded in his favour, on account of Sir Henry's confidence in the stud groom. But he was only holding office on "good behaviour," and he was perfectly aware of the slender nature of the tenure. Only the cloud of his uncle's illness threw a slight sadness over Ralph's satisfied contemplation of the row of loose boxes with their strong, well-bred, and yet gentle inmates. All other clouds had been dispersed by the Sussex sun.

In a letter to Mr. Fitzurse, Ralph begged him not to turn down on Sir Henry's land, out of respect for the poor sick man's recent wishes; and Mr. Fitzurse, accompanied by Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox, called at the Hall to tell him that his wishes should be respected. It was late in October when they paid this visit, and Mr. Snuffbox could not miss the opportunity of putting his foot into it. After the matter in hand had been discussed and settled, the two were asked to lunch, and though neither of them felt quite at ease in the presence of Diana, they accepted.

"Mrs. Brancombe," said Snuffbox, with his mouth full of cold partridge, "I saw a friend of yours the other day."

"Indeed?" she asked, with that sweet smile which became her so well, and which had long fascinated all her neighbours.

"Yes;" he replied. "Colonel Manners, I think his name is. The tall gentleman who used to hunt with you last season. I saw him at Chalford Market on Tuesday last."

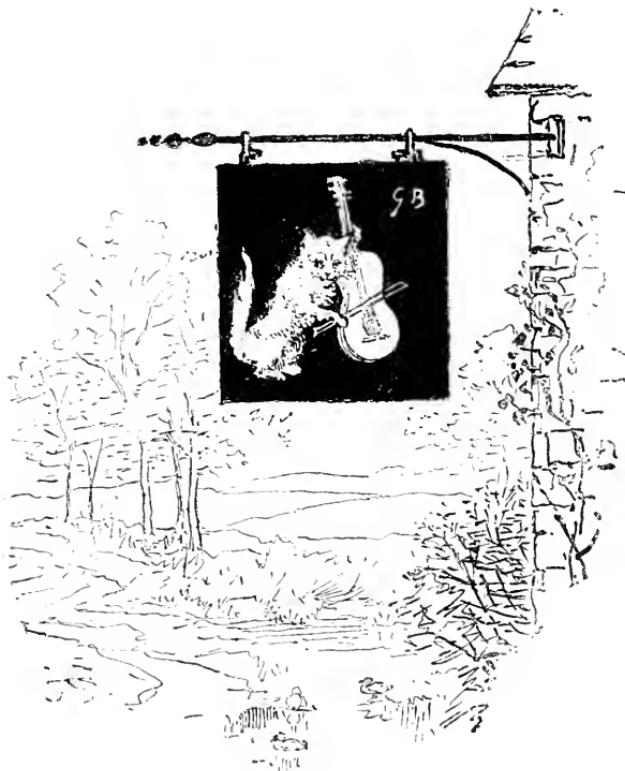
Diana blushed scarlet. Mr. Fitzurse was watching her; Ralph, too, noticed the blush, and for the first time for months the old pain in his heart returned.

"Did you know that Colonel Mannering was at Chalford, Diana?" he asked, when the guests had gone.

"How should I?" said she. "You are perfectly ridiculous about Colonel Mannering."

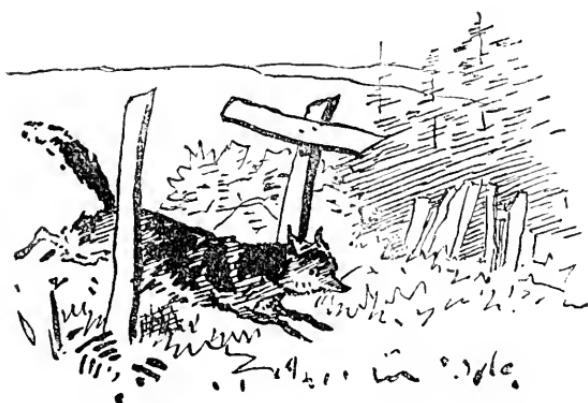
But Ralph did not feel satisfied, and thought that it would

not be ridiculous to make at least a few inquiries. It was the first time he had done so, and he took the step with the greatest unwillingness. But he felt that at any cost a renewal of the flirtation between his wife and the Colonel must be stopped. However, he was unable to discover much more than Saintsbury Snuffbox had told him. Colonel Mannering had stopped for a week at the Cat and Fiddle, to look at some horses, he said, at Chalford; but had bought none, and had gone away a few days before; and Ralph could not gather anything further without betraying more than he wished. For the present, at any rate, the Colonel had left the neighbourhood; and in a few days he was able to ascertain that the guardsman was on special duty at Dover.



CHAPTER XXVI.

HER OPENING DAY.



WAS towards the middle of November that an affectionate letter arrived from Miss Nettlerash, in which she invited Ralph and his wife to spend a few

days at Silverstone. She was very anxious, she said, to make her niece's acquaintance properly, and this would be a good opportunity, as she knew they were fond of hunting; and Silverstone was a good centre for the Old Sarum hounds. "Marian," she added, "is very anxious to go out hunting, and I have no objection to her going, if you, dear Ralph, will look after her. Bingham tells me there is room for two horses. So if you and Diana will come and spend three or four days, we shall all be very glad."

Ralph was very anxious that they should accept Miss Nettlerash's invitation, as he felt sure that the old lady had repented her rudeness to his wife, and that this was meant as the olive-branch.

But Diana was inexorable. "Go, Ralph, and make yourself agreeable to the old fool; and take that little girl out hunting. But don't ask me to go with you. I will stop at home, and look after Uncle Henry."

Nothing would move her. Yet Ralph felt that an absolute

refusal would offend his aunt beyond recall ; so at last he agreed to send Peabody over on Monday, to leave Branscombe by the last train on that day, to hunt on the next with Marian, and to return to the Hall on Wednesday. He would thus remain absent less than two days, and though not quite comfortable about leaving his wife alone, he felt that he could not be always with her ; and consoled himself with the thought that, after all, Colonel Manning's stay at Chalford might only have been an accident.

So he started for Silverstone and faced Mr. and Mrs. Mudbury Dawson, the inevitable guests, without too much suffering. The harpist, fortunately, had departed, for he had borrowed a couple of hundred pounds from Miss Nettlerash, under a solemn promise to repay the amount within a month, and had of course not shown himself since. So the evening was not made horrible by his twangs. Ralph thought that peace was cheaply purchased at the price of two hundred (of his aunt's). Marian was full of anticipation of the morrow, and Ralph was almost infected by her enthusiasm, particularly when her father and mother snubbed the child, and monopolised the conversation. To them Miss Nettlerash always listened in rapt attention.

A nasty, wet, cold fog. The trees in the garden are scarcely visible from the windows, and the white mist rests round on the meadow, making the dismal cows look like dim elephants in the distance. Not at all the sort of morning to ride to hounds. No possible scent when every twig, every spray of furze, aye, every blade of grass is dripping with moisture. "We could not see the hounds, even if they ran," thought Ralph, as he tumbled into his tub. "No hunting to-day. I am sorry for the little girl, too, but it can't be helped." So he donned a morning suit, and prepared to go back after breakfast and look after the farm, and do many other useful things which had been long postponed for want of time to attend to them. Dressing slowly, he cast an occasional glance at the window, and noticed that the fog seemed to become denser than ever. When he appeared in the breakfast-room he was greeted by Miss Nettlerash with the remark :

“ There ! I thought so. You see, Marian, Ralph has not put on boots and spurs, and all those things. You can’t hunt in this fog, can you, Ralph ? ”

“ I am afraid not, Aunt Janet,” answered he, rather sorrowfully. “ There would be no scent, and if the fog does not lift, I don’t think hounds will come.”

“ Not hunt ! ” exclaimed Marian, her face falling, while tears welled up into her big brown eyes. “ Oh, Mr. Branscombe ! not go out hunting, when it is the *only* day for weeks that I shall have the chance.”

“ I fear it is of no use, Marian,” answered Ralph. “ I am very sorry, but it is not my fault.”

“ But the fog may clear off,” expostulated the girl.

“ It *might* clear, certainly,” he replied. “ So might Mr. Gladstone resign ; but I don’t think either event will happen.”

“ Still, might we not go on the chance ? ” asked Marian.

“ Oh, of course we can go, if you wish to,” answered our hero, “ but we shall get very cold and wet on the way, and shall not have any sport for our trouble.”

“ You should not be so foolish,” remarked Miss Nettlerash. “ It would be imprudent to go. You would catch cold.”

“ I am sure I should not catch cold,” cried Marian. “ Oh, aunt, do let me go.”

“ Goose ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Dawson, “ don’t be silly.” Mr. Dawson was of course still in his room.

“ My dear child, I should be very glad that you should go if the weather were at all decent. But look at this fog ; it is getting thicker every minute.”

“ Dear aunt,” continued Marian, who was now quite accustomed to call Miss Nettlerash by that affectionate name, “ I assure you I sha’n’t catch cold, and shall enjoy the ride even if there is no hunting. But I feel certain there will be. It would be too cruel if we could not hunt to-day. Please let me go.”

Miss Nettlerash was quite touched by the girl’s eagerness, and at last said, “ Well, I leave it to Ralph.”

"If we trot out and home briskly," he said, "there is no reason why Marian should catch cold. And she may after all be right ; the fog may clear towards twelve o'clock."

So it was decided, and Marian rushed off to order the horses to be got ready. She was far too excited to eat any breakfast, and beyond a cup of tea and a bit of toast could not be persuaded to take anything. What girl or lad, of true sporting instincts, has not felt the same thrills of impatience on the first hunting morning, and occasionally, too, when hunting has become more familiar ? While the girl was busy with her preparations, Ralph ate his breakfast very calmly, and made it rather bigger than usual to fortify himself against the cold wet fog. Marian came down in her habit before he had finished, and was quite indignant at his being so slow.

"Don't be impatient," he said ; "if hounds come at all they won't be early in a morning like this, and I will not be long dressing."

But he was much longer than Marian liked. Ralph was always careful about his hunting costume, and though it was wet and foggy, he spent just as much time over his toilet as if it had been bright and balmy. When at last he descended the stairs and declared himself ready it was half-past ten, and hounds were advertised at Hanger's Wood, seven miles off, at eleven.

Poor Marian could hardly restrain herself. "They will be off long before we get there, Mr. Branscombe," she said, as he donned his waterproof cape. "Do make haste."

"Lots of time," answered Ralph. "But come along ; I'll mount you."

It was an easy task to lift Marian's slim figure into the saddle. Abendigo knew what was before him, for the breast-plate told its tale, and though good as gold while his young mistress was being mounted, he was keen to start the moment she picked up the reins.

The roads were very dirty, and Ralph would not go on fast, for the pony was likely to splash him, and Ralph hated being

splashed. Peabody pulled less than usual, perhaps conscious that there was not much chance of hunting on such a day.

"Do you *really* think we shall not be too late?" asked Marian, anxiously.

"I assure you, Marian, dear," he replied, "we have more than time. Do you think they could do anything in this fog? Look at it among the trees there."

And, indeed, the prospect seemed hopeless enough. The tall elms on the road-side looked like huge gaunt spectres; their tops were cloaked in an impenetrable veil. The few carts they met emerged suddenly close to their horses' heads; pedestrians loomed large through the mist, magnified many times. Heavy drops fell on them as they passed the trees; every branch in the hedgerows was saturated with moisture. They knew the way to Hanger's Wood, and yet so dense was the fog that they missed a turning and had to ride back half a mile. Ralph became silent as he felt the insidious wet gradually penetrating his lower garments, and his feet becoming like icicles. Even his cigar (which he had lighted as soon as he got clear of Miss Nettlerash's garden) would not burn straight, and smoked black and bitter in the fog. He was positively looking forward to an immediate return journey, and to the big fire he expected to find in his bed-room at Silverstone. But at last they reached the meet, not having passed or come up with a single rider. "You see, Marian," said Ralph, "no one else has come out. We may as well go back." But just then a figure emerged from the cloud.

"There's someone on horse-back," cried Marian, quite pleased.

It was only a tinker on his donkey, but he, at any rate, was also going to hunt, and was therefore some consolation to Marian. Next they came upon a group of three horsemen standing before the "Three Feathers," and consulting with the landlord of that ilk. One of them remarked as they rode up,

"Well, we may as well wait a bit now we are here."

"Yes, Mr. Archbutt, better wait. It might clear up, you

know. And hounds are sure to come. Squire Ward never disappoints anybody if he can help it."

Marian looked at Ralph triumphantly. The latter had not quite recovered his good humour, but was fain to acknowledge that there seemed to be other people in the world as great fools as themselves. Soon several more arrived, and two ladies actually appeared to keep Marian in countenance. A young gentleman on a white horse raised his hat to the girl.

"Who is that?" asked Ralph, who did not often hunt with the Old Sarum hounds.

"I think it's our baker's son," replied Marian. "He drives that horse in the cart sometimes, and brings us the rolls in the morning."

The young man turned round and passed them again.

"Yes," added Marian, "it's young Hampton; how funny!"

The baker's son was very well got up, considering all circumstances. A dark coat, a violet waistcoat, corduroy breeches, Newmarket boots, and a bouquet of small chrysanthemums in his button-hole.

Ralph next recognized Mr. Fetlock, the dealer who supported the Holborn Vale hounds. This gentleman was mounted on a grand-looking horse, nearly seventeen hands high, and looked the real old sportsman all over. As the minutes crawled on, the fog really seemed to diminish. At any rate you could see people ten yards off, and were not taken by surprise and run into without notice. But both were rather astonished when they suddenly heard the cry, "Hounds, gentlemen, please!" and, looking round, saw the sky-blue coats of the Old Sarum Hunt, and Mr. Ward, the stout Master, surrounded by his speckled darlings.

"Oh," cried Marian, delighted, "here are the hounds. How nice they look! You see, Mr. Branscombe, they *have* come, after all."

Ralph admitted that he had been mistaken, and, saluting the Master, remarked that he feared they would not do much.

"I do not suppose we shall," replied Mr. Ward, "but there's *no* telling, though I *can't* fancy there will be any scent to-day."

"The Baker's Son."

J. A. V. HART LITH.



I shall wait a quarter of an hour to see if it improves, and then we'll go on."

"Where are we going to draw?" asked Ralph of Snow, the good-natured little vet, when at last the hounds moved off.

"Lord Westbourne's," replied Mr. Snow. "Bound to go there twice a year to please his lordship. Of course we sha'n't find, and if we did, we could not get the fox away. Why, those blessed woods go all the way to Ovington."

Ralph was disgusted. It was worse than riding home without having seen hounds at all. He knew what drawing the Westbourne coverts meant. For miles up and down steep hills, all in woods, then for miles back again without even a whimper. If they did get on a fox by chance, they were sure to cram up a steep slope through thick underwood, and then to gallop down another all spiked with stubbs, and finally to lose the fox at the bottom. But he had not the heart to spoil Marian's fun, for the girl was full of anticipation, enjoying the brisk trot after the gay Hunt servants in blue, and watching the hounds and the horses and the two or three carriages which tried to force their way to the front. "I'll let her amuse herself as long as she can," thought Ralph. "I wish to goodness I were at home instead of getting wet through here. Hold up, old fool," as Peabody trod on a loose stone. "The very worst hack ever foaled!" he said to himself, though he would have been very angry if anyone else had said so.

Soon they turned out of the stony lane into the big Westbourne woods, and halted at a place where two rides crossed. Ralph took the opportunity of shaking off as much wet as he could, and giving Marian some instructions for her first day's hunting.

"We are not at all likely to have a run, Marian, or if we do, it will only be up and down these woods. But anyhow, remember to keep me in sight. I won't lead you into mischief, and will take care to keep as close to hounds as is needful. Whatever you do, don't ride off after them on your own account. You will be able to take a line of your own some day, no doubt;

but for the present you would be sure to head the fox, or tread on a hound, or make some other blunder."

"Very well, Mr. Brancombe," answered Marian, meekly; "but how about jumping?"

"Oh, there won't be any jumping to-day," replied Ralph, confidently. "If we *do* have to get through a few gaps, follow me, but don't let your pony jump on Peabody's back. He does not like ponies jumping on his back."

"I won't," said the girl; "I'll give you room."

"Yes, and if you should happen to lose sight of me in these beastly woods, the best man to stick to is little Snow here. Mr. Snow," he continued, raising his voice, and addressing the good-natured vet, who was close by, "I have just been telling my charge, Miss Dawson, that she is to look to you as her pilot in case she loses me in these horrible coverts."

"All right, Mr. Brancombe; very glad, I'm sure," said the little man, raising his hat again. "I'll take care of the young lady if you get pounded."

"Not much chance of that, Snow," replied Ralph, "unless I lame my horse on a stub. Why we might as well go home for any sport we shall get."

"Don't be too sure. The fog has cleared off a good deal, though it's rather thick, yet. I *have* known hounds run on a day like this."

Ralph laughed. "Possibly; but not from Westbourne woods."

The conversation was interrupted, as they had to follow each other in single file down a narrow path, hounds hunting in the wet cover on the right of them. Then up a steep slope, where the path was no better than a series of bog holes, in which the horses floundered and splashed at every step. At the top they reached firmer and opener ground, but then crossed a strip where the underwood had been recently cut down, and the much-dreaded stubs had to be avoided. Peabody picked his way amongst them, as Snow said, "like a Christian," while Marian's pony was almost equally clever, but the riding was

anything but pleasant, and Mr. Fetlock's big horse very nearly came on his head over one lot, while the baker's white nag knocked his legs against the sharp points to such an extent as to become almost unmanageable. Then came more riding down glades and boggy drives, and at last a long halt.

"Almost lunch time," said Ralph. "Have a sandwich, Marian?"

"Lunch time?" exclaimed the girl. "Why, we have only just come out."

"Hark!" cried someone, "they've found!" and at once pelted away down the ride, followed by a few ardent spirits.

"Plenty of time," remarked Ralph, listening for the music of the hounds. "It's no use galloping round and round these woods. Take it easy."

So saying, he dropped the sandwich case back into its receptacle, and jogged quietly on. When they turned a corner in the ride they found the group of eager ones stopping. A hound popped out of the thick underwood every now and then, jumping over the brambles and diving under the hazel bushes. Then another head and ears would appear, and a note or two resound. For a few moments there was anxious expectation. The music was still feeble and uncertain; there was anxious sniffing and rushing now to the right, then to the left, and an occasional almost plaintive cry, but nothing yet of unanimous joy. Still an occasional note was heard, and Beecher let them try and work it out. The small field followed at a respectful distance, while the good hounds, with noses in the grass and fallen leaves, scattered wide among the trees and brushwood.

"How clever they are!" exclaimed Marian. "I suppose they are looking for the fox."

And indeed they were, with might and main. But it was a difficult task.

"Not an atom of scent," said Fetlock.

"I knew there wouldn't be," remarked Ralph; "may as well have lunch."

"Better hold on with them," observed Snow. "Listen to

Reckless—she's giving tongue. And she don't often make a mistake. And there's Soreery taken it up."

True enough; and in another moment a dozen throats re-echoed the cry, as the hounds plunged away to the left through the thickest cover.

"Take care of your face, Marian," cried Ralph, pushing Peabody in. "Hold your arm up," and he forced his way through the branches, which closed behind him, and had to be pushed aside again by the girl. "Steady, old man, steady."

Mr. Hampton got a severe scratch in the face from a bramble-bush; Mr. Greenwood's horse was too eager, and knocked his rider's knee against a tree, capsizing him into the brushwood, but he held on to the reins.

There were arms held up in front, and cries behind of "Get up, sir; get your horse out of the way!" "Don't stop the whole field!" "He can't help it; don't you see he is doing his best!" But Ralph and Marian were in front of the unfortunate man and, reaching a ride, cantered down sharply. Suddenly he pulled up.

"What is it?" asked the girl. "Why do you stop?"

"Don't you see?" he answered, pointing to the hounds on his left, "they've lost him. No; they're on him again, by Jove!"

Again the mellow chorus sounded, and scrambling over a fence to the right, the whole pack crossed the ride. There was no time to stop now. Away galloped our friends after Mr. Ward's scarlet and Beecher's sky-blue, for it was hopeless to follow hounds into the thick underwood. Round a corner to the right, where big trees stood far apart, and there was a chance of getting along. Down a slope covered thickly with fallen leaves, into which the horses sank fetlock deep, and: "By Jove, he's gone away!" shouted Ralph, as he sent Peabody over the low rails which bordered the wood on that side. He looked back as he steadied his horse, for there was a steep and deep plough before him, in which he could see the hounds hunting slowly. Marian cleared the rails cleverly; the pony never touched them. He

felt re-assured. The girl can take care of herself, he thought. But even now it scarcely looked like a run. They topped the hill, and got through an easy gap into the big grass fields by Westbourne Hall, but there hounds were at fault. "If they can't run on grass, there's not much chance on plough," grumbled Mr. Fetlock. But without interference they spread out like a fan, while "'Old 'ard, gentlemen, please," came from Beecher, and in a minute Harmony and Welcome gave tongue, while Reckless, ashamed of having been mute so long, joined in, and then Peaceful and Sorcery raced to the wire fence and topped it, and the pack streamed over the grass with loud music towards a small enclosure of shrubs and young trees jealously guarded by netting. There was a momentary anxiety lest Reynard might be chopped, but soon such fears proved groundless, for the appearance of the hounds on the upper side of the shrubbery announced that he had gone away some time ahead of the pack. Away, then, across the park, where one or two over-anxious horsemen, determined to stick to hounds at any price, found themselves on the wrong side of the iron palings, and had to come back to the despised gate. When the palings were left behind and Ralph saw hounds steadily working up another steep ploughed field he at last began to think that there might be something in it after all. But he had seen too many short scurries with foxhounds followed by long checks and slow hunting to believe in saving his horse at the beginning of a run. Peabody was fresh, and his owner scarcely warm yet. He was followed by an eager girl anxious for a gallop, so he went up the hill as if the fox would be killed on the top. There was a fine view over the Wessex Weald from the summit, but there was no time to turn and admire the old gables and chimneys of Westbourne Hall below them, or the big woods clothing the steep hills whence they had driven their fox. Just a glance forward, over undulating hill and dale, grass alternating with plough, black patches of trees here and there and groups of houses, and then the sudden consciousness that all was bathed in the subdued sunlight of a winter's day, that

the fog had gone, and that nothing remained of it save a purple haze in the distance. But hounds are running now with a vengeance. The pack is no longer scattered, fan-like, over the field, occasionally dwelling and sniffing about hedge-row or furrow. They are sailing down a big grass slope in one compact mass, each striving for the lead. They are all but mute, an occasional whimper only betrays the fact that they are on their fox. See ! they swerve to the right. Has he crossed that nasty black fence ? If so we may as well pick a good place at once. So think Mr. Ward and his huntsman, but Hampton sends the white horse at it, crashes through, and makes a fair jump for Ralph and Marian. " Make room for the lady," cries that good fellow, Beecher, as he sees the girl setting her pony's head straight for it, and his cry saves her from being ridden over by an eager sportsman. The blackthorn has scratched her cheek, and her pony has only just saved himself from a nasty fall, for there was an ugly ditch behind that fence. But what matter ? " Forward, forward !" cries Beecher, hustling his chestnut thoroughbred along, and Marian only sees him and Ralph and the hounds. Along a wet furrow, through a gap, and over a very holding stubble, uphill, too, where her pony sinks above his fetlocks at every stride. Marian can ride, but she is young, and this is her first day with hounds. She can't quite make out why the brave pony flounders, and begins to sob a little ; she chirrups to him, and he pulls himself together, but the stubble is very deep, and the hounds in front seem to grow smaller. Through a gate into a lane : firm ground at last, and here half-a-dozen roadsters join the van, and try to look as if they had come across country. " 'Old 'ard, gentlemen, please," and a sky-blue arm is seen raised, while for half a minute hounds throw up on the gravel surface, and the steam rises dense as a fog from the dozen steeds crowded in the narrow road. But the check is so short that it can scarcely be called a check at all ; before horses have been properly pulled up there is a cheery chorus again and the pack dashes along the grass-grown ditch, through an iron hurdle and across

a turnip field. The first whip is down in a moment and has pulled a hurdle out. Ralph holds his horse while he remounts, but meanwhile Hampton, the baker, and Fetlock on his big bay, and a couple more, have stolen to the front, so there is no time to lose. "Thank you, sir," says Harry, settling into the saddle. "But we must ride to catch them now; there's nowt but grass in front." Slices of mangolds fly as they gallop across the drills. Through a gate out into a meadow; at the bottom is a little wood, surely he will have dwelt in it! No; hounds plunge in, and before any one has time to take a pull at his horse their music is heard again on the far side. Round the wood along a footpath, for it is no use trying to push through, then a bit of grass-covered hill, and hounds make a great sweep to the right with loud music. Good; there is a convenient line of gates. Hampton throws the first open, Beecher catches it, the whip gives it another shove, and, thank heaven, it sticks open, so Ralph can gallop on, and Marian can follow. Two more big fields with open gates between them; then hounds disappear through a great black hedge, and Beecher leading, rides for the gate. "Locked, by Jove!" he cries, as he turns his horse back and looks for a handy place in the hedge. Nothing; it is too thick, and there is a stream of water behind it. "Look out," cries the baker, and sending his white horse at the gate tops it cleverly. There must be no hesitation now, for hounds are running fast, and scent is improving. Over goes the chestnut, barely hitting the top bar, and then Ralph sends Peabody at it, just giving him a reminder with the spurs. Peabody is not likely to make a mistake, and then it is galloping again over grass whence a gap leads into a bit of plough, and there is another sharp ascent, over which the hounds disappear like magic. When the little ridge is topped, Ralph puts his hands down again and passes the baker's white horse like a flash of lightning. He just hears him say "Eversley brook," but the words convey no further meaning, for he does not remember to have heard of the brook before. The plough is again exchanged for grass, and then there are a number of small water ditches to

cross ; between them the ground becomes heavier and heavier at every stride. Just in front is a row of pollard willows, and the sky-blue jackets slip down between them. "Water," thinks Ralph ; "I wonder whether he will jump it." No ; Peabody will not jump it, nor will any other horse in England. Eversley brook, swollen by recent rains, is a great stream twelve or fifteen yards wide, and there is nothing for it but to walk in and trust to Providence. When Ralph reaches the willows, Beecher is emerging on the other side, while the whip's horse is scrambling about in the water. "Steady, old man !" cries Ralph, pulling Peabody together, "Steady ; we must not gallop through this." He has marked the place where the huntsman crossed, and keeping well to the left, only just gets his boots wet, while the whip was over his horse's back in water. The fox has run along the bank for a little, and hounds hang for a few seconds, but then they are away again, through a farm-yard, round the haystacks, across the palings, into the garden, The farmer's wife opens the little wicket gate, and carefully following the neat gravel path, they emerge on a high road, while Ralph hopes for a chance of letting Peabody get his wind. Not a bit of it. Along the grassy side of the road, then again to the left, up a steep bank and hedge, across two ploughed fields towards a large wood. Ralph sees the wood and thinks that there *must* be a check here ; so takes a pull and eases Peabody up the steep plough. But when he reaches the wood hounds have disappeared, and there is no one visible except Hampton. "Over this fence," cries Ralph, pointing to the right, whence he hears the music. The baker sends his horse at the easiest place, but the white is done and refuses.

"Get out of the way," cries Ralph, and Peabody flies it as if they had only just started, and tears down the hill again fresh as a two-year-old. At the corner of the wood Ralph sees the hounds emerge, and there are only two blue coats and a black one with them. On again, over a low stile which Peabody hits hard. "Come up, you fool," says Ralph, giving him a touch with the spur, and then sees Beecher flying another one a

good deal higher. "Confound these stiles for a tired horse!" he thinks, but needs must, and this time Peabody jumps a foot too high, nearly sending Ralph over his head. Another hundred yards, and the silvery shine of water, flowing through a park-like meadow, gleams in front. The two blue coats fly it; the black one souses with a splash into the middle. Ralph chooses his place and gives Peabody a cut with his whip. "Over, old man!" and with just a peck the good horse lands safely on the firm bank. Black coat, too, has scrambled out, and is climbing on his horse again. The hounds are now running mute, they rush through some iron hurdles, and the whip pushes the gate open, through which Ralph and black coat follow. But Beecher keeps on to the left. Why? Never mind, thinks Ralph: "always stick to hounds." On they go, galloping over beautiful firm grass, over undulating ground, under tall trees, past handsome cows startled from cud-chewing by the music of the hounds. Ralph is now on the right of the pack, the whip on the left, black coat close to them. But what is that in front? Alas! a ghastly wooden paling, close as a wall, and ten feet high. The hounds reach it and bay wildly; some strive to get over and fall back, others rush up and down it in despair. Reckless manages to top it, but the pack is pounded. The whip jumps off and attempts to pull out a plank; Ralph does likewise and helps him. With united efforts they manage to tear down a couple of the palings, and the hounds rush through with loud music. But how are *they* to get through? There are three tremendously strong wooden bars, the highest at least nine feet from the ground. It is hopeless. Done, by Jove! And then, and only then, Ralph thought of Marian. He had actually forgotten all about her. But all this delay has let the others up, and while they are tugging at the planks, he sees Mr. Fetlock and Mr. Ward and young Lord Somers gallop along on the right side of the palings. That is the reason why Beecher did not turn through the gate. Why did not the fool tell them? There is no nearer way out than the gate they came in by, or down through the village. Disgust, anger, despair are all

depicted on Ralph's countenance. He gives another desperado tug at the top bar, when he sees the little vet sailing along on his well-bred brown, and Marian in his wake, her pony all over foam, but still able to go somehow. The whip, too, has disappeared. Hurrah! the bar is yielding. One more pull and Ralph gets it down, but tumbles with it and grazes his shin at the lower one. No time to wait. Peabody has recovered his wind, so he scrambles on and sends the horse at the now possible place. There is a little hesitation which Ralph does not like, but the gallant animal does his best. Even now the rails are four feet high and very stout; he gets over them somehow, but certainly hits them hard. Now Ralph must ride by following the hoofmarks of the leaders, and he *does* ride all he knows. More grass fields, a bit of plough, a few small jumps, and then, on the slope of a green knoll, he sees a group assembled of which he knows the import. A blue-coated man is standing on the grass, holding a carcase aloft, and round him a crowd of dirt-stained, draggled hounds, with heads uplifted for their reward. Half-a-dozen figures stand near, holding their horses' bridles, and one lady is among them, the only person still mounted. As he rides slowly up, for Peabody has now shot his bolt, Beecher approaches Marian, and solemnly presents the brush to the delighted girl.

"Well done, Marian," he cries, and she turns to him a face flushed with the run, but only enough to make it more interesting, eyes flashing with pleasure, and all her features lighted up with the excitement of the chase.

"Oh! was it not grand, Mr. Branscombe?" she cries.

"Capital," he answers, "if I had not been pounded at those palings." But he had no idea until that moment that Marian Dawson was really a very pretty girl. "Where are we?" he asked of Beecher.

"Craysfoot, sir; about two miles from Marbury."

"Marbury! why that's twelve miles from Westbourne, quite in the Bankshire country."

"All that, sir," says Lord Somers, "and twenty from Silver-

stone, the way we have come. You're right in the Bankshire country. One hour and thirty-five minutes, scarcely a check, and only six up at the finish. One of them a young lady, too," he added, gallantly raising his hat—"rides like a good one."

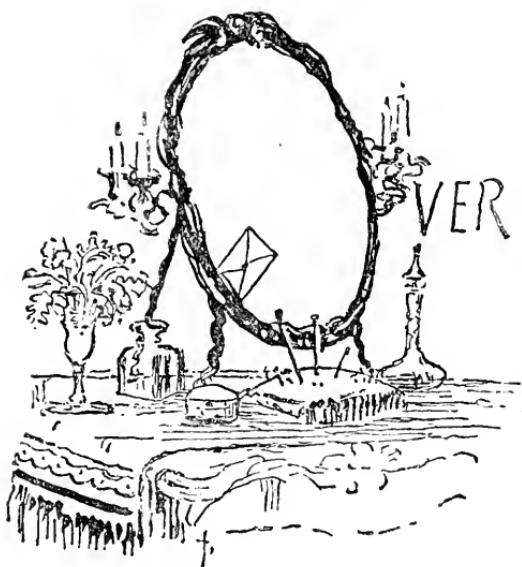
"It is her first day with hounds," observed Mr. Snow.

"Her first day with hounds! Really?" continued Lord Somers. "Yet when she goes home, she may say that she has ridden all through THE BEST RUN OF THE SEASON."



CHAPTER XXVII.

A STEEPELCHASE.



TWENTY miles from Silverstone, but only seven or eight from Branscombe Hall," said Ralph to his charge. "Abendigo is quite done, and Peabody can scarcely raise a trot. I hardly know what to do."

He looked at his watch. It was barely half-past two. "We are right in the middle of the country,"

he continued. "The nearest railway station is Warboro', and that is seven miles, too. We could ride into Marbury, and grieve them, but then we should still have twenty miles home, and they would both be as stiff as poker-chips. You would not care about leaving the pony at an inn, would you, Marian?"

"No, indeed," said Marian, patting her favourite's neck, "not after such a gallop. Fancy leaving the poor dear to some drunken ostler!"

"I think by far the best plan," said Ralph, "will be to ride over to Branscombe Hall, and keep your pony for a day or two. Abendigo will be well looked after there."

"But what shall *I* do?" asked Marian.

"Oh, we can put you up. Diana will make you comfortable, and I will take you home to-morrow morning."

"But Miss Nettlerash will be very anxious."

"No," answered Ralph; "I will telegraph to her from Marbury."

"But I have no clothes," urged Marian.

"Diana, or some of the women, will put that all right," Ralph said, supremely indifferent to an objection of this nature. "I do not see how otherwise we can deal with the horses and ourselves. We are very lucky to have run into my own country."

So they stopped at Marbury just to send a telegram and to give the horses some gruel, and then jogged along the winding lanes towards Branscombe Hall. Ralph of course knew this part of the country well, and in less than an hour they turned into the gate of Branscombe Home Farm, and five minutes later clattered into the stable yard.

"Is your mistress at home?" he asked the groom who came out to take their horses.

"No, sir, missus has driven out in the brougham," answered the man. "She started about three o'clock."

"All right. See to that pony and Peabody. Rub them down dry and get them some gruel. Put the pony in the box next to Black Swan. Come along, Marian," he said to the girl, who was so tired and stiff that she required his arm to help her into the house.

He went straight to the housekeeper's room. "Mrs. Armit," he said to the elderly woman who had looked after Sir Henry's servants for some years, "will you please try and make this young lady comfortable? She is my aunt Miss Nettlerash's ward, and has had a very hard day. We must put her up for to-night. See what you can do for her."

Mrs. Armit curtseyed and said, "We did not expect you home till to-morrow, sir, and I am afraid there's no fire in your dressing-room, nor in the library either."

"Never mind me, Mrs. Armit; I shall do well enough. Look after Miss Dawson. I suppose there's no change in my uncle? Did your mistress say when she was coming home?"

"No, sir. The mistress said that you wouldn't be home

till to-morrow, and that she did not think she'd have any dinner to-night."

Ralph smiled, knowing that his wife liked a "high tea" when she could get it.

"Well, you will have to find some dinner somehow, by-and-by."

With a nod to Marian he left her to Mrs. Armit, who at once took her charge to her own warm room, while a fire was being lighted up in one of the spare bed-chambers.

Ralph walked leisurely to his dressing-room, and was just proceeding to throw off his hunting clothes, when he perceived a white object stuck into the corner of the looking-glass. It was a note, addressed to himself, and he was amazed when he recognized his wife's handwriting.

"What on earth is this?" he said aloud, and tore it open.

There were but a few lines, evidently written in haste and emotion.

"When you receive this," he read, "I shall be hundreds of miles away. Do not attempt to follow me; it would be useless. I have tried to love you, but it cannot be. Forget if you cannot forgive
DIANA."

He stuffed the letter into his pocket, seized his hat and hunting crop, and rushed to the stable-yard. Short as was the distance, he had rapidly thought over his course of action before he reached the stables.

"Do you know which way your mistress drove?" he asked Charles, who was rubbing down Peabody.

"Chalford way, sir, I believe," answered the man. "The mistress took a box with her, sir. She mentioned that she was going shopping, and told John to drive her to the station first."

"What time did she start?" continued Ralph, as quietly as he could.

"Three o'clock, sir," answered the man. "The brougham was ordered at a quarter to, sir; but missus was a little late getting away. Three o'clock went just as I opened the gate."

"Is James there?" asked Ralph again, burning with impatience and anxiety, but struggling to appear cool. "James! saddle Black Swan at once, and girth her up tight. Look alive, man; I shall be down in three minutes."

And Ralph ran back into the house, into the library, where there was a time-table.

She started at three for Chalford, as if to catch a train at about four o'clock. But there was no train to London at that time. There was one at 3.20, but she could not possibly have intended to catch that one. It was eight miles over a hilly road, and Diana knew too well what horses could do to under-estimate the time required. After this hour there was no up train stopping at Chalford Station till 5.40. If she had proposed going by this, there was yet ample time to stop her. He laid the book down with something of relief; he had plenty of time to spare, and could change his things and drive over in the dog-cart without exciting the slightest surprise in the house. He could also telegraph from Chalford to St. Paneras, if further consideration satisfied him that this would be of any use. But stay! was it certain that she would go to London? Might not the fugitives—for, of course, the Colonel must be meeting her at Chalford—select another route, in order to baffle pursuit? They, too, would think of the electric wire, and might suppose that Mrs. Armit or the butler, finding that their mistress did not return, would telegraph to Ralph at Silverstone. Perhaps they were going down the line instead of up. Ralph again opened the book. There was a down train due at Chalford at 4.7, which passed Donnington without stopping, called at Warboro' at 4.23, and reached Eastport, a favourite place of embarkation for Holland and Germany, at 6 p.m. And besides Eastport, there was Grandborough, a newly created station for Continental traffic, whence steamers started for Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Hamburg on several evenings in the week. For all these departures the 4.7 train would serve. Undoubtedly, that was the one they intended to take. If Ralph had not returned until the next day they would have been abroad hours before he reached

home. Of course it was hopeless to get to Chalford in time. It was now ten minutes to four. The train would be due there in seventeen minutes; but as it stopped at Warboro', would it not be possible to catch the fugitives there? Ralph was sternly determined that he would overtake them if it was humanly possible. He would not have the family disgraced, and he would sooner shoot Colonel Mannerling on the spot than see a paragraph on the elopement going the round of the papers. It was nearly nine miles to Warboro' Station by road, but two less across country. He again looked at his watch. Thirty-two minutes before the train was due! Black Swan ought to do it, if he took her on a bee line across country. She was thoroughbred, and jumped like a cat. She *must* do it, but there was not a moment to lose. Too much time had already been wasted, though he was quicker in consulting the time-book, and deciding on the course to pursue, than can be the reader in perusing the narrative of his doings. Ralph did not stop to exchange his pink for a more appropriate coat. As he sprang into the saddle and gave the mare her head he thought bitterly of the quarry he was now chasing. Was scarlet as correct a colour for wife-hunting as for fox-hunting? But all his energies, mental and bodily, were required for the work before him, and his thoughts had to be concentrated on the shortest cut to the station. He resolved not to lose a second if he could help it. Shouting to James to tell Mrs. Armit to give the young lady some dinner, he galloped down the avenue at top speed, and had disappeared before the astonished grooms knew what he was about. He would gain nothing by turning through Bray Copse; of that he felt sure; but at Long Wood he opened a bridle gate and scampered down the ride at full speed. The rays of an almost horizontal sun shone in his eyes as he passed out of the big covert and set the mare's head straight across the ploughs and fallows of the higher land. She flew the little fences in her stride, for this was the easiest part of the country to cross. Soon he came to the end of the Brancombe property, and the ground began to fall as he neared the Warboro' Vale. There had, so far, been nothing to

stop him. He knew every inch of the way, and steered for handy gaps, negotiable fences, and gates it was easy to open. But the most difficult task was before him. His next "point" was Scratch Wood, and there was a wide expanse of grass to cross, intrenched by two flights of posts and rails. It was out of the question to go round by the gates; he might lose two minutes. Black Swan had never had such a chance since she had been in the Branscombe stables. She stole across the turf like a shadow, her long easy stride being exactly suited to the ground. The cold air rushed past Ralph's head, and cooled his heated brow. At the first post and rails the mare never stopped, but flew them in her stride; the next flight was higher, and the ground was soft. There was an ominous clatter of her heels on the timber, but Ralph sat well back and recovered her with a pull on the snaffle. Then he bore a little to the left up a farm road, where two gates were fortunately open, and on the firmer ground the mare recovered her wind, which the last wet meadow had tried a good deal. He hammered down a lane and up the rise leading to Scratch Wood, astonishing the driver of a cart heavily laden with straw. "Be the hounds here?" asked the man; but Ralph scarcely heard the question. Twilight was rapidly coming on, and the time was getting very short indeed. From Scratch Wood the line lay across the water meadows they had run over on the day when Ralph had first made the Colonel's acquaintance, and as he jumped the first ditch he remembered, with bitter regret, the words Fetlock had spoken to the Honourable Seaton Delaval on their way home. "It's her fancy man," the horse-dealer had said. Yes! her foolish, wild fancy; her fancy which no human nor divine law, no sense of gratitude nor of honour, was strong enough to drive out. Another ditch, and yet another, both gleaming yellow in the last tints of the sunset. Then he must ford the Warboro' brook. Ralph thought he knew the place well, yet when he reached the bank it seemed rather strange to him. This was evidently not the usual ford; he must have missed it somehow. For a moment he pulled up Black Swan. She was covered with foam,

and her flanks were heaving. He looked at his watch ; it was ten minutes past four. Thirteen were left to reach the station—nearly three miles to cross, even if the brook were safely forded. There must be no hesitation. A touch of the spurs, and the gallant mare plunged in. The water was deep, and the bottom bad ; she floundered and lost her footing. Ralph was off her back in a moment, and sank in above his waist, but Black Swan, relieved of his weight, scrambled to her feet again, and he urged her on with his voice while he dragged her by the bridle. It seemed to him an eternity before they reached the bank, for the mud clung to his boots and dragged him back, while the mare struggled in the deep ooze. At last she stood on the grass, scared and shivering. The hillside looked black in the deepening twilight, but Ralph knew that there was nothing to stop them now till they reached the Station Road. He urged her up the turf, through a gap in the fence, into a convenient furrow, and then he topped the hill, and saw the confused lights of Warboro' town below him on his right, while the red and green signals at the station were straight before him. Down he sped at the best gallop the mare could raise. She crashed through the next fences, barely rising to them, and then they were on firm grass again, marked out for future building plots, but fortunately not yet cut up. Then down a steep lane and to the left along a half-finished road, closed at the end by a post and rails. He thought there was a place where he could creep through, but as he galloped along the road he heard a whistle, and raising his eyes saw the signals shifted and the engine lamps approaching on the down line. That must be the train ! Not fifty yards from the station, and to miss it ! It should not be. He could not look for the gap. "Come up, old mare," he shouted, as he drove the rowels cruelly into Black Swan's flanks, and rode at the timber. But she was done. She tried her best, and rose as high as she could, but she could not clear the top rail.

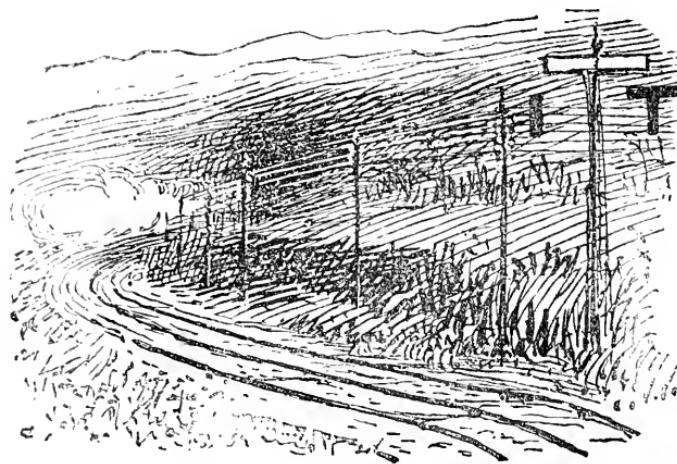
With a heavy thud, horse and rider crashed down on the hard road, while the grinding of the brake was heard from the station opposite, and the porters shouted " Warboro' ! " " Warboro' ! "



"She tried her best."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN INTERVIEW AT CLOSE QUARTERS.



W A S not for nothing that Ralph had ridden to hounds ever since he was a boy. His experience stood him in good stead on

this momentous occasion. When the mare strove to rise at the rails, he drew his feet out of the stirrups; he guessed that she would come down, and rode, in fact, for a fall. Almost before her knees touched the ground, certainly before she rolled over on her side, he was on his feet, and leaving poor Black Swan to shift for herself, ran across the station yard into the building.

He darted through the booking-office on to the platform. The porters were banging the doors. He rushed along the train, and only slackened his speed when he came to the well-lighted first-class carriages. Glancing into each as he passed, he saw neither the Colonel nor Diana. The blinds were all up, and the passengers exposed to the full light of the station gas and the carriage lamps. But the last compartment in front, nearest the brake-van, was hermetically closed, and a narrow white label, with "Engaged" in red letters on it, was pasted diagonally across a side window.

"Open this door, Smith," said Ralph to his friend the station-master, who was busy at the van.

"Not this one, sir," answered Smith, recognising Ralph immediately. "Had a good day with the hounds, Mr. Ralph? Get in here, sir," and he led him to the next carriage.

"No, this one, Smith; look sharp. I know it's engaged. Never mind, I'll see you through it."

Smith stared. At that moment the guard of the train held up his hand, cried "Right forward!" and gave his shrill whistle. Ralph dived into his pocket and brought out a handful of silver.

"Be sharp, man! Mum's the word! I'll see you right," and he stuffed the money into Smith's hand.

The train was moving, and Ralph seized the brass bar on the carriage. The station-master clicked his key and opened the door. Ralph swung himself in as the guard cried, "Now look out there, you'll be killed!" and the door was slammed behind him.

"This carriage is engaged," said a well-known voice; "you can't get in here."

It was Colonel Mannerling in the near corner. Ralph had actually trodden on his toes. In the other corner, with her back to the engine, was a cloaked figure, which he recognized at once as Diana's. Startled by the sudden intrusion, she looked up.

"Ralph!" she cried, and buried her face in her hands.

The Colonel stared in blank amazement. It was undoubtedly an awkward position. The train was not timed to stop for another forty miles, and the three were bound to remain in each other's company for at least that number of minutes.

"Yes," said Ralph, endeavouring to recover his composure, "it is I. Providence has interfered to prevent your running away with my wife, Colonel Mannerling."

"Sir," began the Colonel, "I don't understand by what right
_____"

"You don't understand by what right I have come to stop

you? Indeed? I should have thought that even *your* intelligence would have grasped that much. However, first I have to talk to my wife. You and I will settle matters by-and-by."

The Colonel was too much taken by surprise to reply. In fact it would have been difficult to frame an appropriate answer. Running away with another man's wife, as he undoubtedly was, he could scarcely assume the part of outraged virtue. At the moment, not being able to find anything to say, he held his peace. Ralph went over to the other side of the carriage, and sat down opposite his wife.

"Diana," he began, "you must come home with me. I am here to save you from disgrace. You have neglected my warnings, you have been fascinated by this man, but it is not too late. You can still return without any one but ourselves knowing what has happened, and at the next station you will have to get out with me."

Diana shook her head, but did not answer.

"You must," he continued. "It cannot, of course, any longer be a question of love and affection. That is at an end. But Sir Henry Branscombe's niece, Ralph Branscombe's wife, shall not be known as an outcast and a lost woman, as long as I am alive to prevent it."

"Mr. Branscombe," cried the Colonel, starting up, "you are insulting the lady."

"Insulting her!" sneered Ralph. "I wonder which of us two is insulting her? I, who am come to bring her back to her duty, to her home, and to an honourable life, or you, who have seduced her from her husband, and are going to make her your mistress?"

"Sir," exclaimed Mannerling, flushing scarlet, while Diana winced under the scathing words, "how dare you? There will of course be a divorce, and you are speaking to the future Mrs. Mannerling."

"Indeed?" asked Ralph. "So you want to marry her? And you think the best way is to drag her through the mire of the Divorce Court first, and make Diana Branscombe a name to

be bandied on the lips of every newspaper reader in the kingdom? No, Colonel Mannerling, I shall not help you to that. On the whole, I would rather shoot you and take my chance of being hung. My wife would at any rate not be spoken of and sneered at as a lost woman by every ruffian in England. If you are so anxious to marry her now, why did you not propose to her before? She would have accepted you soon enough."

"Last year," answered the Colonel, glad to have at last a reasonable chance, "it was impossible for me to marry."

"Why?" asked Ralph incredulously.

"Because I had contracted an unfortunate marriage when very young. My wife was still living. She died suddenly this summer."

"If what you tell me is true," replied Ralph, after a few moments' thought, "you are not quite such an unmitigated villain as I thought you were."

The Colonel started violently.

"Oh," continued Ralph, "do not excite yourself. I am not here to pay you compliments. I thought you a degree worse than you are; that is all. But even now I am by no means sure that you would marry Diana, even if she were free. She might have no money, you know."

Mannerling again started to his feet.

"Anyhow," continued Ralph, now quite calm, "I sha'n't give you the chance. I have already told you that I intend my wife to come home with me. If you object actively, I shall throw you out of this carriage."

"I should like to see you try," said the Colonel, smiling.

"I don't think you would, much," replied the husband. "I'm pretty handy with my fists, sometimes. But it would not be good form to have a fight in the presence of a lady, would it? So we will dismiss that question for a moment. You cannot very well prevent my taking Mrs. Branscombe home when the train stops at Mornington, because I should appeal to the police, and the police would scarcely give you a right to take her away. There would only be more scandal for nothing."

Now, at last, Diana spoke :

“ It’s of no use my going home, Ralph. I am afraid I should run away next time I had a chance.”

“ Poor Diana ! ” sighed he, again addressing himself to her ; “ and poor me ! Do you hate me so very much ? ”

“ Not at all,” replied Diana. “ I like you ! Oh, dear ! if you were only my brother, I would love you.”

“ Do you love him so very much ? ” asked Ralph.

She merely bowed her head.

“ My dear Diana,” Ralph went on, “ it is a terrible fate, but you and I must make the best of it. You must put up with me till I break my neck, or die of a broken heart. For, indeed, my heart is broken, Diana, and I shall never hold up my head again.”

She looked at him, doubtfully. There was no mistaking his sad eyes, nor the expression of his voice.

“ We have made a dreadful mistake,” Ralph went on, “ and do you think I can ever be happy again, knowing that she whom I have loved more than my life has been false to the vows she swore at the altar ? If you are wretched because you love another, I shall be equally wretched, having loved you in vain. You will be without a husband, I without a wife. But until God puts an end to our misery by taking one of us away, we must bear it. Just think of your uncle, if, as may occur, his senses return ! think of his agony at knowing how you have erred ! Think of your own future life—at the best, a *divorcée*—pointed at, talked about, refused admittance by the very people who were at your feet when you were Mrs. Brancombe ; with a conscience of evil which will not let you rest, scorned by this world, and unworthy of a better ! That would be the future of the brilliant, beautiful, and clever Diana Brancombe.”

Diana groaned, and hid her face in her handkerchief.

“ This,” continued Ralph, “ is only a suggestion of what would happen. Your misery would pursue you day and night. In the midst of gaieties you would think of the home you had made desolate, of the old man you had disgraced. And what

sort of gaieties would be yours ? Only such amusements as are obtainable for a little money. Wherever honour and position are the keys of admittance, you, Diana, would be excluded. There is not a pack of hounds with which you could show your face ; you would have to look from outside on the world you love so well ; and as to society, you would be a pariah. Can your love for this man compensate for all the suffering you would heap on yourself, on me, and on others ? ”

Diana was a woman, and stood up for her lover, even now. She was sobbing ; but between her sobs she said, in almost inaudible tones, “ I cannot help it. He is good and brave ; I must go with him.”

The Colonel had, to use an Americanism, been “ lying low ” during the past few minutes. He saw that the game was going against him, and that if he did not interfere, Diana would yield to her husband. He resolved to play his trump card. He was not the man to give up without a struggle the woman whom he loved passionately, as far as his nature could understand love—the woman for whom he had lied and intrigued during the past twelve months. A supreme struggle must be made. Anyhow he felt that he would have to fight Ralph sooner or later, perhaps some morning on a desolate field in Belgium, without any advantage on his side. Better fight him now, while Diana was still his own ally, and when by a bold stroke he could secure the victory.

Ralph was stooping forward on his seat, holding Diana’s hands. Quick as thought, the Colonel hit him on the temple with his left hand, and then throwing his right arm round the neck of poor Ralph, who had fallen against the carriage door, he nearly throttled him.

“ Quick, Diana, let down the window and open the door ! That side is not locked. We can throw him out. Quick, I say ! ” he cried, as Diana stared in vacant amazement. “ He won’t hurt ; there’s no other line on that side.”

But a sudden revulsion came over Diana. A veil seemed to fall from her eyes, and suddenly she recognized Colonel Man-

nering in his true colours. Was this then the man for whom she had betrayed her brave and loyal husband? One who would not scruple even to murder; to low dastardly garrotting, to gain his ends? Cowed by her outraged husband's words, he had patiently waited till his victim's back was turned, and had then smitten him cruelly from behind! And for this man, who was trying to throw an innocent fellow-creature, one whom he had grossly injured, out of a train flying over the ground at the rate of fifty miles an hour, for him she was going to sacrifice her whole life, and the happiness of all who were dear to her! She grew sick at the thought. But it was not the time to faint, and Diana Branscombe was not the woman to give way.

"Let him go, Colonel Mannering. Take your hands off, I say," she cried, wrenching the soldier's arm from Ralph's throat. "Cruel coward!" And she flashed her black eyes at him, as he fell back on the seat, as much overwhelmed by her changed manner and words as by her violent grasp of his arm.

Ralph struggled to his feet, breathless, exhausted; and looked round all dazed. The Colonel sprang at him again. Diana threw herself between them.

"You shall not touch my husband!" she cried, holding up her right hand menacingly. "If you dare, I shall break this glass, and call the guard. I shall tell him that you tried to commit a murder! a murder, do you hear?"

"Diana!" murmured the Colonel, surprised, while Ralph was endeavouring to collect his senses; "what do you mean, my love?"

"Your love!" and her lip curled. "Shame on me, that I have ever allowed you to use such a term, and to use it with reason! Blind fool that I was, to be bewitched by your sweet words and your soft eyes. Oh, God! Oh, God! can I ever be forgiven?"

And her nerves gave way to the strain, as she sank back on the seat, and hid her face in the cushion.

The two men glared at each other. Ralph attempted to

arrange his dress, which had sorely suffered since he left Silverstone, and a strange figure he looked. His boots were covered with mud, his red coat bespattered and torn, his arm was bruised from the fall at Warboro' station, his temple bleeding from the Colonel's cruel blow, his collar and tie pulled out of all shape in the struggle, his hat battered, hanging behind him by the string. The train was slackening speed. He pulled up the rug which had covered Diana's knees, and threw it around him.

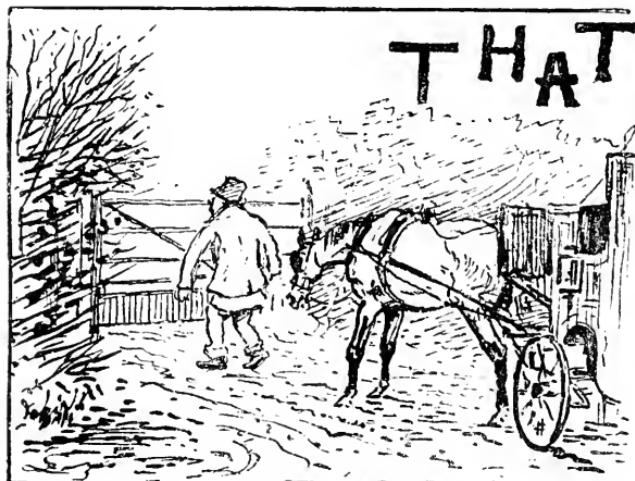
"We get out here, Colonel Mannering," he said. "Please to make room."

And he raised his almost unconscious wife from her seat, and helped her on to the platform.



CHAPTER XXIX.

RECOVERY.



night journey by the mail, and the long, slow drive in a hired fly from Warboro' to Branscombe were scarcely broken by a single word from either of the couple.

So many exciting thoughts crowded on Ralph's mind that he could not sleep, though his body was exhausted by the violent work and emotions of the long day. Every limb was aching, and every nerve strained to its utmost tension. Diana seemed to be sunk in a species of stupor. She murmured, "Thank you," when her husband made her as comfortable as he could in the return train, and when he helped her on to the deserted platform of the Warboro' station. But she showed no other sign of consciousness. It was not the time to inquire after poor Black Swan. There was no one at the station except one night-porter, and the ostler of the "Red Lion" had to be roused out of deep slumber to get a conveyance ready. The night was chill and damp; the thick mist of the previous morning had returned, and the poor job-horse went stumbling and shambling along the dirty road, while the old vehicle rattled and groaned behind him.

It was two o'clock when the dripping driver climbed down from his seat to push open the Park gates. Ralph lowered the glass,

and looked out as they slowly plodded up the drive. The old house loomed black through the mist, but there was a faint glimmer of light in a window. Some one was evidently waiting up for them. The sound of the door-bell echoed strangely through the deep silence of the dark passages, but they had not to wait long, for Mrs. Armit herself came to open the door. "Keep the change," said Ralph to the man, as he gave him a sovereign, and turned to help Diana out. She appeared almost inanimate; a cold shiver, which occasionally shook her body, was the only sign of life. "Put your mistress to bed," Ralph went on, "we have had a very cold journey and she is quite done up."

Mrs. Armit stared a little. She was too good a servant to ask questions, but she would evidently have given a month's wages to know what had happened. It was scarcely usual for her young master to gallop off again after he had returned from hunting, without stopping to change his clothes; and it was still more strange for him to return with his wife in the small hours of the morning, when the latter had gone off professedly to do a little shopping.

"Make haste," exclaimed Ralph, who had had time to prepare as much of a story as he cared to tell, "Mrs. Branscombe had to go to see a sick friend a long way off, and she is quite tired out with the excitement of the journey. Can you make her some tea? Are any of the servants up?"

It was some time before poor Diana was made comfortable, but when Ralph left her she had fallen into a deep sleep, which was to last for many hours. He, however, was less fortunate. He lay tossing uneasily from side to side, and when at last he dropped into an uneasy slumber woke with a start, fancying he still felt Colonel Mannerling's grasp round his throat, and the soldier's angry eyes glaring at him. The dawn was creeping through the window of the little dressing-room before he suddenly remembered Marian. Poor little girl! What had she done with herself since the previous afternoon? Tired as he was, he rose at his usual hour, and was in the dining-room before Marian appeared.

"I am very sorry that you have been left all alone," he said, as he took her hand. "My wife was suddenly called away by the dangerous illness of a dear friend. I did not want her to remain alone at this lady's bedside, so I also followed. And I had no time to tell you about it before I started."

Ralph was not in the habit of telling stories, and he told them like a novice. He could easily make a brief statement to the servant, who had no right to ask further, but he felt uncomfortable when he had to meet Marian's frank open eyes.

"I am so sorry," she said; "I hope the lady is better."

"Oh, yes, thank you," answered Ralph. "But my wife is so done up that I fear she will not be able to see you before you go."

For now his burning wish was to get rid of Marian. The girl's expression, which she had not yet learned to control, showed wonder not unmixed with incredulity, and Ralph felt that it would be highly inconvenient to keep her at the Hall during the next twenty-four hours.

"If you please, sir," said the servant who brought in the urn, "Mr. Greaves would be glad to see you when you are disengaged."

"Let him wait," said Ralph.

Mr. Greaves was the Warboro' vet. Ralph suspected that the visit concerned Black Swan. Nor was he mistaken. For when it had been arranged, over their breakfast, that Marian was at once to return to Miss Nettlerash's wing under his own escort, Ralph went out to speak to the surgeon. It appeared that the poor mare had picked herself up after her fall, and limped along the road towards home, her bridle hanging down loosely, and her knees bleeding. She was stopped by a couple of boys, and they in turn were arrested by the local policeman, who with the usual intelligence of his kind, was about to walk them off to the station-house on the charge of stealing the mare. Fortunately a farmer passing the spot was attracted by the small crowd of idlers and children, and at once noticed that the horse was severely hurt. He suggested that the lads' explanation was probably a

true one, for obviously an accident had occurred. The constable was very unwilling to give up so promising a "case" as one of horse-stealing, but the farmer insisted on the poor mare being led to Mr. Greaves' forge. That gentleman took charge of the animal, and the boys were released. In the morning when examining the mare by day-light, he recognised Black Swan, and at once rode over to the Hall.

Ralph feared that it would be necessary to invent another tale; but avoided it by telling a half truth and using the old story.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Greaves," he said. "I had to catch a train on the most urgent business, and the mare fell close to the station. I was obliged to leave her on the chance. It was a very serious matter, or of course I should never have done so."

Mr. Greaves looked as if he could not understand any business which could be serious enough to make a man leave a wounded horse in such a plight, and wondered how the mare could have fallen. However, he went on to say that he feared she was hopelessly injured; would Mr. Branscombe look at her?

So it was finally arranged that Ralph should stop at Greaves's stable on his return that afternoon. For he had quite made up his mind to take Marian back to Silverstone himself, though his presence was very necessary at home. He felt, however, that if he sent her back with one of the women servants, there would be gossip without end, they would talk all the way, and Miss Nettlerash would cross-examine both when they arrived, and form her own conclusions, very unfavourable to Diana, from what she would extort from them.

So in an hour, Diana being still asleep, they drove off, and Ralph had the extraordinary luck to find that his aunt had gone to a lecture of the Rev. Mudbury Dawson's. He declined to wait for her, and having deposited Marian, who was silent and thoughtful, hurried back at once.

When Ralph entered the stable where poor Black Swan was standing in a loose box he was horrified at his favourite's appearance. Tears rose in his eyes as he noticed her drooping

head, her wounded knees, and her mangled side. To-day she did not greet him with that joyous neigh which told how welcome were his visits. She scarcely turned her head to see who the visitor was. A long consultation with Mr. Greaves followed.

"There is nothing for it," said the vet, "but to shoot her. We might possibly pull her through, but she will never be fit for anything better than a cab."

For a moment the awful question suggested itself to Ralph's mind, whether he had not paid too high a price to get his wife back. On the one hand appeared, as if by the glare of a flash of lightning, all the miseries, and discomforts, and anxieties Diana had caused him to suffer; on the other, there opened up a vista of years of coldness, a house without the light of love, and a wife who would now be little more to him than a stranger whom he had rescued from destruction. But the thought was dismissed almost as rapidly as it arose. He heaved a sigh as he turned out of Greaves's yard, but it was a sigh of relief. He had given the best horse in the stable to get his wife back, but he felt that the sacrifice was as nothing, and it was unworthy to dwell for a moment on it. Still he thought of the gallop across the Warborough Vale, and how the good mare had saved his honour for him, and had sacrificed her life in the effort.

A surprise awaited him on his arrival at the Hall. Sir Henry had asked for him several times and, according to his valet's account, appeared a great deal better. Of course, Ralph was anxious and nervous about the first interview with Diana after the adventures of the previous night, but he did not dare to postpone a visit to his uncle. When he reached the invalid's chamber he was still more surprised to find Diana reading to him. She looked pale but perfectly composed, and she gave her hand to Ralph as he came in just as if they had parted on the usual terms two hours ago.

"I am a great deal better, Ralph," said Sir Henry, quite vigorously. "I have been wanting to see you all day. I have been ill a long time, but I believe that I shall be all right again soon."

"Indeed, I hope you will, uncle," answered Ralph, grasping the old man's weak hand, and gazing at those wasted features, which were now flushed, either with fever, or with the glow of returning health. Sir Henry then asked a number of questions about the farm, the horses, and the neighbourhood. But he had to be reminded several times that Ralph and Diana were now married, for although his memory was excellent about events long passed, he seemed to have none for those which immediately preceded his illness. He looked strangely at Diana occasionally, and when she had left the room, he stammered a question to Ralph.

"Ralph," asked he, very hesitatingly, and endeavouring to collect his thoughts, "what has become of that Colonel, that Egyptian—no, I mean Indian officer, that used to be here so much. I seem to fancy that he made love to Diana."

"He has gone for ever, uncle," replied Ralph, wineing.

"Gone, has he?" asked the old man. "Well, well, all the better. He never could ride Black Swan, the fellow had no hands, though his seat was good enough. How is Black Swan? The best mare I ever rode in my life. All right, I hope? I shall go round to the stables to-morrow, Ralph, and have a look at them all. Tell me about the mare."

In the midst of his grief over the black mare's fate Ralph had never for a moment dreamt that he would be called to account for it by his uncle. He replied, blushing:

"I have had a very bad accident with Black Swan, Sir."

"What, with hounds?" asked the baronet.

"Yes, Sir," stammered Ralph. "We fell over a post and rails, and the mare has had to be shot."

"Oh dear, oh dear," sighed the old man. "That is the one horse I was anxious to ride again, and you must needs go and break her back for her. How could you be such a fool, Ralph? I thought you were too good a rider to gallop at impossible places. No doubt you went too fast, and very likely the mare was done." And the old gentleman sobbed like a child over her fate. But fortunately his weak memory did not allow him to dwell very long on his loss. Ralph had the happy inspiration

to tell him that Peterborough was very well, upon which Sir Henry immediately looked up chuckling, and said :

“ Peterborough, ah Peterborough, is all right, is he? That is the horse you fancied you had in your stable once, eh, Ralph? ” he laughed. “ Wanted to make out that Boulter did me? No, my boy, no. I know a horse when I see one. You could not afford to buy a horse like that, when I used to pay your debts once every six months. Very comfortable safe conveyance, Peterborough. Yes, I think I’ll ride Peterborough to hounds. Where do they meet to-morrow? ”

Ralph was aghast. Here was this old gentleman, who had for six months been confined to his room, and whose brain was seriously affected, talking of riding to hounds. The more Ralph recommended caution and a little patience before attempting such a feat the more obstinate Sir Henry became, until at last, giving it up in despair, our hero took the opportunity of the valet’s bringing in the old gentleman’s dinner to make a bolt of it and consult Diana, who appeared in the drawing-room as usual. She had never had much colour, but she was now almost ghastly in her pallor. The extreme difficulty of the first few moments was got over by Ralph at once plunging into the subject at that moment nearest his thoughts. Diana could scarcely believe him when he explained Sir Henry’s intentions. Old Dr. Quayle was at once summoned, late as it was, and on his advice Diana went to her uncle’s room to attempt to soothe him by reading and to divert his thoughts. The subject was not again mentioned by the invalid. Sir Henry directed a telegram to be sent to Mr. Throgmorton Toms, requiring his presence as soon as possible.

“ There are a number of City things,” Sir Henry said next morning to Ralph, “ which you do not know anything about, my boy, and it is no use talking about them with you. I must see Toms.” For next morning Sir Henry, far from being worse, seemed a great deal better. He dressed carefully towards eleven o’clock, and insisted upon donning an old pair of breeches. Clad in these and drab gaiters he took his nephew’s arm, and with a big stick in his right hand toddled downstairs and into

the stable-yard. Of course he walked as a man walks who has not been out of his room for many months, but still there was an enormous improvement, and every quarter of an hour in the fresh air seemed to do him good. His mind wandered every now and then, and he still occasionally forgot that his nephew and niece were now married. On the whole, however, he seemed fairly alive to what was going on, and evinced as much knowledge of horses and as great a comprehension of their wants as in his best days. In the course of the day Sir Davenport Harley and Mr. Toms arrived from London. The former was amazed at his patient's apparent recovery.

"The brain," said he, "does sometimes wake up again after having been dormant for a prolonged period, but such awakenings are not to be trusted. Sir Henry appears to be in very excellent physical health. You must, however, be very careful, as his brain power may give way at any moment, and then though his body may be perfectly strong he will not be able to control it." Sir Davenport saw every advantage in bodily exercise in the fresh air, though of course he decidedly objected to hunting. "But," he added, in conclusion, "do not contradict the old gentleman if you possibly can help it. Divert his thoughts when they dwell on a scheme that cannot be realised, but do not refuse point blank to please him."

So the neighbourhood was surprised and gratified at seeing Sir Henry a few days afterwards jog along the lanes on his quiet Peterborough, with Ralph on one side of him and Diana on the other.

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW FIRM.



ARIAN was very reticent about her stay at the Hall, but she would probably not have been able to withstand Miss Janet's cross-questioning if that lady had made up her mind to find out all the circumstances. The elderly maiden was very pertinacious and very curious about her relative's affairs. No evasive answers satisfied her; and when she deter-

mined, as she said, "to get to the bottom of a thing," she generally succeeded. After all, the art is not so very difficult. All that is required is an entire absence of false shame, and Miss Nettlerash certainly possessed none. She was not to be put off by any fear of appearing indiscreet, nor did she stop to consider other people's feelings. Tact was a quality which no explanation would ever make her even understand. When she had once fastened on to a victim the unfortunate person might fence and writhe, but could not hope to escape Miss Janet's clutches. White lies were of no avail, for she boasted an excellent memory, and mercilessly exposed any little venial falsehood without the slightest regard to time, or place, or the presence of others. Marian was, as a rule, far less troubled by Miss Janet's questions than other people, for the girl had nothing to conceal, and her life was spent under the very eyes of the old lady. So Marian was almost the only person who was not afraid of her. The Rev. George was always frightened out of his wits when his sister-in-

law came to the Rectory, and kept out of her way as much as he could; it was, indeed, one of her grievances that her sister's husband hardly ever paid her a visit. When, by some extraordinary chance, Mr. Brancombe called at Silverstone, he was on pins and needles till he got away again, for if there was any delicate matter in the parish, or a disagreeable story among their mutual friends, which the Rector was anxious not to mention, Miss Nettlerash was sure to discover, as it were intuitively, that there was something to conceal, and would not rest nor let her friend go until she had wormed it out somehow. As to the Rector's wife, she was fairly able to hold her own with her sister, though she succeeded only at the cost of being extremely rude and rousing Miss Janet's anger. Nor was the assistance of her nieces disclaimed when the inquisitive lady wanted to find out anything, and her curiosity knew no bounds. The girls had to tell their aunt what they had for dinner, tea, and breakfast, where they walked, what friends they saw, and what frocks they possessed. In their innocent prattle they occasionally alluded to matters which Miss Nettlerash would take up and worry about until she had made a mountain out of a mole-hill. Nothing was unimportant in her eyes, and her sister's weekly bills were no more sacred from her investigations than the Rector's small charities, or the proceedings at the Sunday school. Some years previously, when the Rev. George Brancombe had been in great pecuniary straits, one of the girls had unfortunately let out "that it was only that tiresome butcher calling for his money," during Miss Nettlerash's visit to the Rectory. On that clue she worked indefatigably for weeks until all her sister's troubles and Mr. Brancombe's weakness were exposed. She was never tired of alluding to these events, and henceforward watched her nieces' dress, and her brother-in-law's expenditure, with the eyes of a lynx, not forgetting to charge her sister with reckless extravagance if Selina wore a new frock or if Mrs. Brancombe had a small tea-party. Luckily for himself and his family, the Reverend George had had the courage never to ask his sister-in-law for assistance;

had he done so, she might, grudgingly enough, have lent him a few pounds, but she would certainly have installed herself permanently at the Rectory as a sort of receiver or manager in bankruptcy.

When Miss Nettlerash paid visits to her friends they were never very short ones. She came for a good talk, and generally invited herself to remain to luncheon or tea, or whatever the meal was. Invariably she first asked for a room in which to change her boots, and very often her inner pocket produced a pair of stockings as well. When this operation was completed, she would appear in the drawing-room without her cloak, but still wearing one of those bonnets which were a snare to small birds and the delight of the more mischievous of her juvenile friends. And she never failed to say, "I have not brought a cap, so you must not mind my sitting in my bonnet." A pound and a half of grapes, sundry apples, a bunch of cherries, a few ears of corn, and some very green leaves which looked like spinach were therefore nodding and rustling all the afternoon as a constant accompaniment to Miss Nettlerash's tongue. This careful lady was particularly careful about her gloves. She wore black ones from motives of economy, and asserted that nothing was so foolish as a tight fit, numbing the hands and wearing out at the finger-tips. Her own number was therefore eight and a quarter, and when she called anywhere for one of her little visits she slowly drew her gloves off, smoothed them out carefully, flattened them out, folded one over the other, and wrapped them up in a piece of silver paper which was produced from her cornucopia, her inner pocket. But of course the gloves were *not* pocketed. Such an operation might have injured their gloss. Nothing was more distasteful to her about Ralph than his habit of turning one glove inside the other, and laying the pair down anywhere handy. It was almost as bad, she thought, as his addiction to tobacco. Miss Nettlerash placed the long, smooth packet of silver paper on the drawing-room table, and had ever a watchful eye on it during her visits. When very intimate anywhere she would occasionally produce a thimble, needle, and black silk,

and mend the tiniest holes. And at home she would spend a few minutes blackening the seams or the finger-tips with a camel's-hair brush and some Indian ink.

Now, Silverstone was some distance from town, and Miss Nettlerash did not like railways. She, therefore, drove the two greys in, did her shopping, and then called upon some friend while Bingham and his horses were resting and eating. But of late years some of her friends had moved out of town, others had proved ungrateful and ungracious. Whether the bonnet, or the gloves, or the sharp tongue had wearied them, may remain doubtful; at any rate, Miss Nettlerash more than once found that she could not obtain luncheon and two hours' gossip at the houses where she expected to find both. "Not at home," was insufficient to deter the enterprising lady. If that answer was given to her inquiries she would often say, "I will wait for your mistress in the drawing-room," and would instal herself there until its owner came home, or, which was more frequent, descended from the upper stories. And she even went so far as to ring and ask for tea or cold meat. It was this last audacity which closed many doors to her. Some of her friends gave orders that Miss Nettlerash was on no account to be admitted, and invented idle tales to keep her off; for instance, scarlatina was alleged, or the departure of the family for Italy. Of course Miss Janet ultimately found them out, and their characters suffered fearfully. No crime was too bad for them, and in some cases, serious scandals had resulted. But the upshot was that Miss Nettlerash lost most of her houses of call in London. Complaining bitterly of her fate to the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson, that gentleman suggested that she should join the Middlesex Club, a most respectable institution for both sexes, situated in Verulam Street, Mayfair. At first, Miss Janet had been shocked, believing, like many other old maiden ladies, that club is another name for debauchery. But when the reverend gentleman, who was anxious to belong to the institution himself, and thought that Miss Nettlerash might as well pay his entrance fees, pointed out to her that a Bishop was chairman, and that sundry clergy-

men and ladies of undoubted age and advanced respectability were on the committee, she began to look at the matter in a different light. Then Mr. Dawson explained how she would be perfectly independent of her false friends, could change her boots there without inconvenience, could stop in the place as long as she pleased, and have her carriage to fetch her at any hour, and might, besides, have her parcels sent to the Club by her tradesmen, she agreed to join the establishment. Her name was proposed by the Right Rev. Chairman, and seconded by a lady distinguished for her talents in propagating small-pox, and soon Miss Nettlerash talked as glibly of her Club as any youth about town. Nor was it long before she proposed both her lecturing friends, and gave them a very convenient place whence to date their letters and circulars.

It has already been mentioned that when Marian returned to Silverstone under Ralph's escort, Miss Nettlerash was attending one of her favourite's discourses. This amusement was, however, no longer a novelty, and would not have deterred her from questioning the girl as to everything at the Hall if she had not found a letter awaiting her with the Middlesex Club initials, which at once took her entire attention.

“Shameful!” she exclaimed, when she had read it, and, for want of another *confidante*, she tossed it over to Marian. “What abominable rudeness! I shall take my name off, though the Club *is* very convenient sometimes. But that conceited secretary has no notion of civility to a lady!”

The letter was as follows:—

“MIDDLESEX CLUB, VERULAM STREET, W.
“MADAM.

Dec. 17th, 18—.

“The attention of the committee having been called to the circumstance that the hall-porter's box is often almost filled with parcels addressed to you, among which are such articles as game and butcher's meat, which, now the weather has become milder, attract large numbers of flies, I am directed to request you to be good enough not to order meat or other perishable

articles to be sent to the Club, and to reduce the number of parcels addressed to you to more reasonable limits.

“ I have the honour to be, Madam, yours obediently,

“ T. H. WELLS,

“ *To Miss NETTLERASH, SILVERSTONE.*

Secretary.”

“ Reasonable limits, indeed ! ” exclaimed Miss Nettlerash. “ What is a Club for, I should like to know, but the convenience of its members ? Did you ever hear of such impertinence ? ”

“ Well, aunt dear,” Marian ventured timidly to suggest, “ you know you *do* have a good many parcels sent there.”

“ Not a great many. Besides, I have a right to do so. I don’t pay eight pounds a-year to drink a few cups of tea in the Club. I could get my tea anywhere else just as well, and not pay more for it. It’s for the convenience of the thing. I shan’t pay sixpence or eightpence on every parcel to please Mr. Wells. At that rate I might as well buy my things at Silverstone ! ”

“ Perhaps you might, aunt,” Marian replied.

“ What do you know about it, you little goose ? ” asked Miss Nettlerash, angrily. “ Why, I have left the Silverstone tradesmen long ago. I buy things at the Stores now, and get something for my money, though the Stores are not what they used to be. But at any rate I get the right weight, and have not to pay twice as much as the things are worth.”

“ Could you not have the parcels sent down by post ? ” asked Marian.

“ Post ! ridiculous. They would cost more than ever, and they would never get here in time. What is the use of keeping a carriage and two horses if I can’t turn them to some account ? I shall write and tell that jackanapes what I think of him. Flies, indeed ! flies in the middle of winter. I suppose that fool of a hall-porter does not like the trouble of taking the parcels in. But I’ll show them that I won’t be insulted.”

“ If you please, miss,” said the parlourmaid, entering the room, “ the coachman would like to see you.”

“ Go and ask what Bingham wants,” said Miss Nettlerash to

Marian ; "I hope one of the horses is not lame. They always *do* go lame when I want them particularly."

Marian thought that Bingham had come about the pony's absence, and readily obeyed. The old man touched his forelock with a proper show of respect, and Marian at once told him that Bendigo was safe at Branscombe Hall and would be sent over the next day. But Bingham's thoughts were far from the pony. He was never very anxious about his horses, except in so far as he could make money by them. More important matters were now troubling him. Ralph's interference had robbed him of a good portion of his perquisites, and Miss Janet's adhesion to co-operative principles had largely diminished the remainder. The little that was left was now also threatened, for Miss Nettlerash had that morning informed him that she had made arrangements to have her horses supplied with hay and corn by a London corn-chandler at so much per horse per week. Even then there might be something to be saved on their food, and the case would not have been entirely hopeless, but when he received orders to drive into town with the carriage and fetch parcels from the Middlesex Club the coachman felt that this was the last straw. He was not going to demean himself to be a common carrier. It was bad enough to start in the morning and drive Miss Nettlerash about London all day, returning to Silverstone late in the afternoon, wet, dirty, and weary. But at any rate these long excursions were sweetened by the fact that he charged seven shillings for his dinner and putting up the horses, while he only spent half the amount. Lately he had had to fetch a carriage load of parcels several times a week, and had hoped against hope that the system would not continue. Now, however, that he saw that Miss Nettlerash intended to make a practice of it, he could stand it no longer. What with driving into town, attending to the horses, washing the carriage, and saddling Bendigo, he would have no rest at all. And the loss of dignity was awful. The carriage was not a carrier's cart, and Bingham determined that it should not be used like one. It was degrading, it spoilt the cushions, it looked disgusting. To some

extent Bingham had a fair case. Instead of making a hundred a year net profit over and above his wages he could now only earn twenty by very hard work and very careful cheating. And the collection of articles Miss Nettlerash was in the habit of ordering was certainly rather extensive. On his last journey he had had to bring a huge parcel of groceries, some gloves and hosiery, a sirloin of beef, seven pounds of "soup meat," half-a-dozen bottles of sherry ("a fine nutty wine at 30s."), a brace of grouse in a very advanced state of maturity, ten books from the circulating library, a pair of boots, and a small gas stove which Miss Nettlerash had sent to London to be mended.

So Bingham requested to see his mistress. What he had to say was for her ear only.

"What is the matter, Bingham?" asked Miss Janet, sharply, for she was very sore about the letter from the Club and suspicious of new trouble.

"If you please, miss," answered the man, "I should like to leave this day month, miss."

"Why? what is wrong, Bingham?"

"There ain't nothing particularly wrong as I knows on, miss, but I should like to leave."

"Why, you have been with me seven years, Bingham."

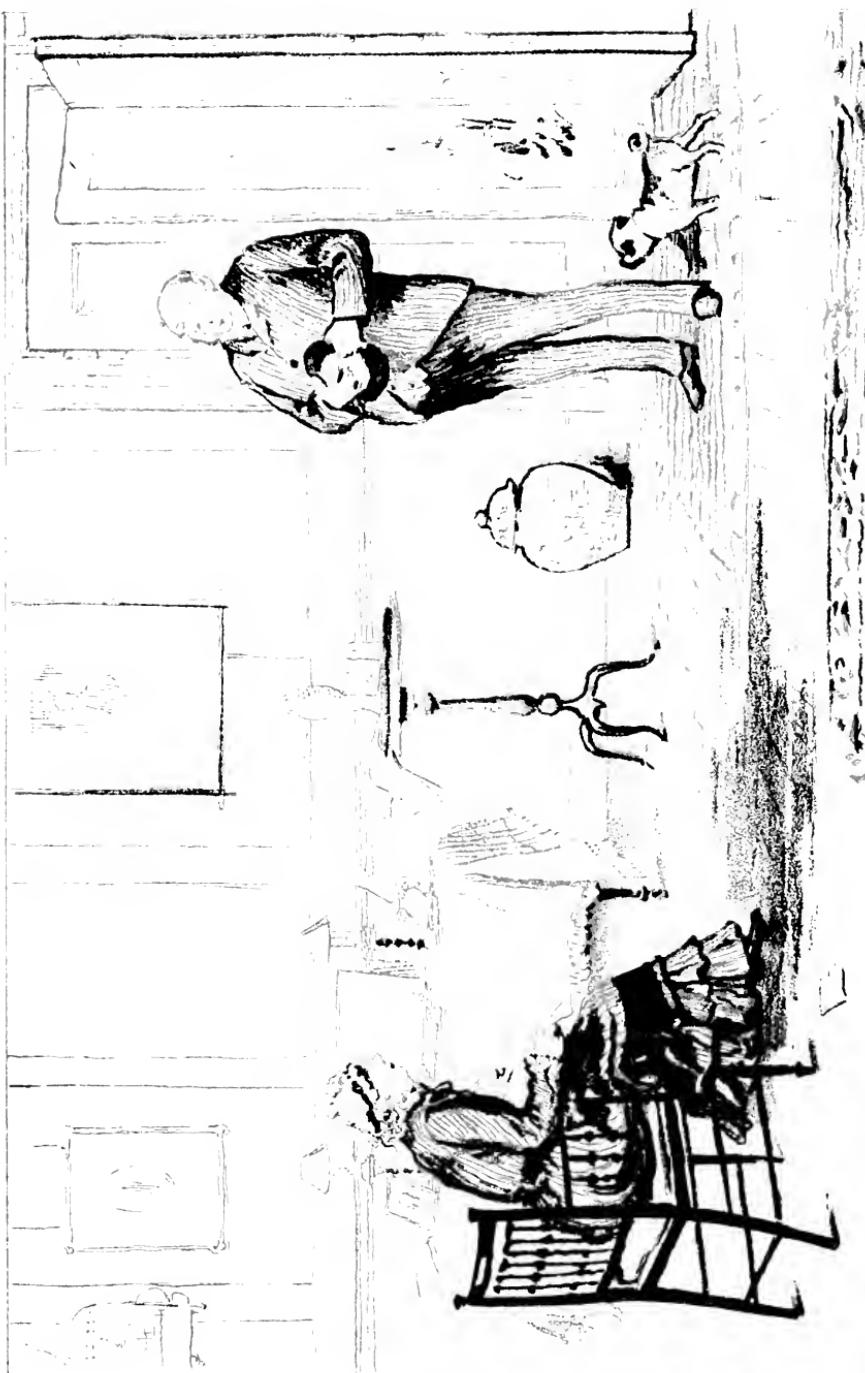
"Yes, miss, and I hope I've given you satisfaction," replied the coachman, again touching his forelock.

"And why do you want to go, Bingham? Are you not comfortable?"

"Thank ye, miss," continued the coachman, "I'm pretty comfortable, but I'm getting old, you see, miss, and I can't stand the work. It's drive, drive to town near every day; and then what with groomin' the 'osses, and Miss Marian's pony, and cleaning up and washing the carriage, I feel as I can't do my dooty. And I won't stop where I feel I ain't doing my dooty, miss. 'Sez I to myself, you ain't keepin' the carriage and 'osses as they ought to be kept, for a lady like yourn.' So I'd better go, miss."

"Honest man!" thought Miss Nettlerash. "He is not so strong as he was, and I have overworked him. Well," she con-

"What is the matter, Bingham?"



tinued aloud, "we can manage that, Bingham. We will get a lad to help you. It will not be very expensive, and it will ease your mind."

The honest coachman thought it over for a minute. Should he accept this offer? He would have no work except the driving, for of course the stable lad should do all the grooming and cleaning. But to drive in and out of town almost every day during the long winter was not a pleasant prospect. Besides, he had saved more than a thousand pounds, all snugly invested. If he was ever to make a start in life it must be now. He was getting on in years, and did not wish to remain a servant all his life. Handsome Jack was ready to enter into partnership with him.

"Thank ye kindly, miss," he at last replied. "The fact is, miss, there's a friend of mine ready to help me with money to keep a little place of my own, livery and sich like. It won't be such hard work, and I'm getting old for serviee. I've always been honest, and I ain't a-going to change now. I'll tell you the truth at once. I've saved near a hundred pounds, thanks to you, miss; and my pardner, he's got summat of his own, so we thinks of keeping a few 'osses. No offence, miss, I 'ope."

"None at all, Bingham," answered Miss Nettlerash, still much upset, but now seeing that she could not alter the man's determination. "I hope you will get on well."

"Indeed I 'ope so, miss, and I 'ope you will give me your patronage, and recommend me to your friends. I've done my best for you, miss, and I'm sorry to leave you." And the old hypocrite stuffed his fist into his eye, as if to brush away a tear.

Miss Janet was much moved. He had, she thought, been a faithful servant to her. So, though much exercised in her mind about a change of coachman, she accepted the situation, and presented Bingham with ten pounds over and above his wages. Ralph was at once written to, and before the month was over he found a man for her. But he did not dare to congratulate his aunt on Bingham's departure, for her letter was so full of praises, so enthusiastic on the coachman's merits, that he felt it would be useless to endeavour to undeceive her. So with the new year

there appeared over the entrance to a mews out of Wimpole Street a large blue board bearing an inscription in bright gold letters:

BINGHAM AND ROBINSON.

Liberty and Commission Stables,

HORSES BOUGHT AND SOLD.

CARRIAGES SUPPLIED.

SELECTED SOUND HUNTERS AND MATCH HORSES.

RIDING LESSONS.

and Miss Nettlerash sent the new firm's circulars all over the country and recommended honest Bingham to everybody.

This mode of advertising the new firm, though very useful, was not the only one adopted by the enterprising partners. The second page of the *Times* was henceforward regularly occupied by a few lines inserted by the wily Bingham or his handsome associate, nor were other papers without occasional support from them. There was, of course, the standing and regular professional advertisement, which conveyed the same information as their sign, only somewhat amplified; under this would often appear another, by which "Noblemen and Gentlemen" wishing to dispose of *really* first-class horses, were requested to write (in confidence) to Bingham and Robinson, who were always ready to give a good price for thoroughly sound and young horses. These two advertisements, taken together, largely helped trade; for people on the look out for horses could hardly read the first without noticing the second, and the conclusion many arrived at was, that since Bingham and Robinson announced themselves as ready to buy only first-class animals, they would have nothing but first-class animals to sell: for of course they could not sell what they had not got! Therefore, a good many persons, who fancied they knew something, and entertained a great fear of coppers, ventured into the mews with less timidity than if they had had ocular proof of how particular the firm was in its purchases. But the intelligent reader need scarcely be informed that Bingham and Robinson

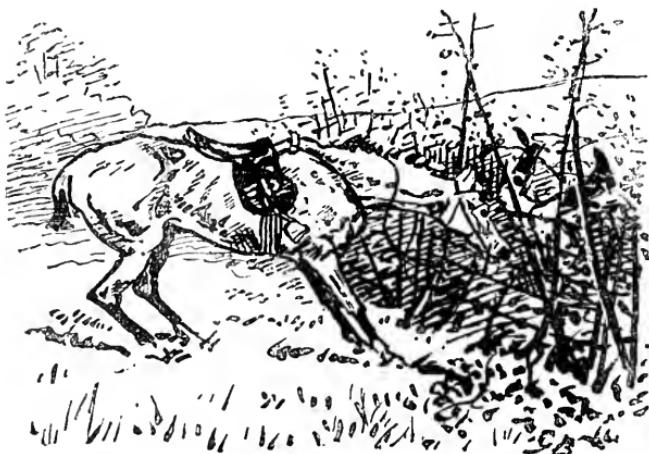
were not quite the people to pay a high price for a good horse. Their first principle was to get a good horse for very little money; so far, there was nothing to which the most scrupulous could object. Their next principle was, if the good horse could not be bought for a trifle, to buy a bad one for less money still, and to make him look like a good one.

When letters came from "Noblemen and Gentlemen" anxious to dispose of their steeds, one of the pair always at once went to look at the horses offered. A deal rarely ensued, but neither of them omitted to examine the animals closely, and as they both had excellent memories for the points of a horse, they were able to "spot" those they had once seen almost at any future time. This knowledge was invaluable to them at inferior auction sales, or when dealing with one of their colleagues in the coping line, and occasionally they really succeeded in picking up an excellent bargain by thus keeping an "eye" on a horse.

A good understanding with some of the stud-grooms in large establishments was another important element in their business, and one by no means very easy to obtain successfully. Gentlemen of the calibre of the great Boulter are not easily handled by any one of less importance than a swell horse-dealer like Bedford. They are afraid of the small fry, because they do not want to lose their lucrative places. Nor did Bingham and Robinson ever try to "stick" such important persons with worthless horses. They either tried to sell a fairly good horse at an exorbitant price (subject, of course, to a heavy commission), or to obtain a still better one out of the great man's stable for a mere song. Bingham having moved in what his partner called "good society," often restrained his less cultivated associate when the latter thought he had got hold of an unresisting victim. "Don't let us spoil our reputation, Joe, whatever we do," was his favourite advice. "These things gets about. If you sell that young gent the old spavined chestnut for a sound five-year old, he's sure to tell his pals at the Club that he's been

done, and who's done him. Let him have the bay mare; she'll carry him well enough. Never mind if we don't make quite so much over it; he'll bring his friends along our way."

But when occasion offered, Bingham was as ready for a cope as Handsome Joe. They occasionally arranged for stalls at sundry places in various parts of London, and Bingham could personate an elderly squire or a country parson to perfection, while Joe took the *role* of groom. No third person was ever admitted to these transactions, and the stalls were taken by the week or even by the day under assumed names: generally from coachmen whose masters were out of town, or who knew that their masters would not look into the stables very often. Such men were glad to make an honest penny, and in such places the worst of the quadrupeds purchased by the new firm were shown as "magnificent barouche horses," "tried hunters," or "charming ladies' hacks." When an animal was sold to an unwary stranger, Bingham and Robinson disappeared, and the victims were not inclined to waste money and time in trying to find them. Thus the firm grew and prospered in a comparatively short time, and within a couple of years of Diana's flight and return, Mr. Bingham seriously thought of presenting himself as a candidate for the Marylebone Vestry.



CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LAST RUN.



MEANWHILE the position of affairs between Ralph and his wife had by no means improved. In the first few

days of Sir Henry's convalescence they had both been so busily engaged in the common object of ministering to his wants, diverting his thoughts, and generally amusing him, that they had scarcely time to think of their own troubles, and Mr. Toms's visit, during which he was, notwithstanding both Ralph's and Diana's objection, closeted sometimes with Sir Henry, had given them another common object in their now mutual dislike to the little City financier. But when Mr. Toms had departed, when Sir Henry again began to take matters into his own hands and to talk to the farmers himself, when he toddled down to the stables daily and took his daily ride, not indeed as he had done before, but still without appearing to be a hopeless invalid, then neither of them had much else to engage their thoughts, and they naturally began to dwell on their troubles.

It must not be supposed that Diana's heart went out again towards Colonel Mannering. Her idol had been rudely but completely shattered that night. It could never again be placed on its pedestal. The real strength of Ralph's affection for her, his loving-kindness, his courage, his coolness and readiness of resource had all become apparent to her in that short hour, and

she wondered that she had never appreciated them before. Bitter were the tears she shed on her solitary pillow in the long winter nights, and cruel were the pangs of remorse that gnawed at her heart. In those wakeful hours there came back to her Ralph's many acts of gentleness and love, the patience with which he had borne her changeable temper during their journey on the continent, the trust he had reposed in her when in town, and the faith with which he had accepted her explanations of her meetings with Colonel Mannerling. Every word she heard from the tenants and their wives and children, every remark from the servants, every conversation with her neighbours only served to show her how utterly blind she had been to Ralph's good qualities. No one had a bad word for Ralph. He was popular among gentry, yeomen, and peasantry alike. The little children ran out of the cottages when he passed, sure of a kind word if not of a "sweetie." The mothers smiled as they curtseyed to him, the men lifted their hats and many of them stretched out their hands, knowing that Ralph was not ashamed to grasp the roughest fist. In the night watches every little event and trifling circumstance came back to Diana, and she felt the anguish of having possessed this man's love and having spurned it; the bitterness and the shame of having possessed this man's trust and having abused it. How willingly, if he had then appeared at her side, would she have thrown herself at his feet and implored his forgiveness, even though he might never love her again—of course he *could* never love her again. In such moments she felt it would be a consolation to tell him how some fiend had stricken her with blindness and made her as foolish as she was false. But when daylight appeared she could not muster courage to open her heart on this dreadful subject. She did her duty as well as she could and went about the house with a pale face and weary steps. She tried to please Ralph in all the arrangements she made for the household, and thought only of his convenience and that of Sir Henry. But she could not look in his eyes to search for that love which she used to find there when she did not want it. There seemed to be a steel plate round her heart which pre-

vented its expanding and forced her to restrain herself whenever her grief appeared too much for her to bear.

On the other hand, Ralph had reason enough for never alluding to the circumstances of that night nor of their early married life. He was far too careful for his wife's feelings to wish to remind her of the dreadful events which had occurred, far too full of tact to touch strings which might jar unpleasantly on her delicate organization. He knew that she was sorry for what she had done, and he felt convinced, illogical as the conviction might appear, that she could be trusted implicitly in future. He was perfectly satisfied that Colonel Mannerling had now no chance whatever of being listened to, and that he would be treated with scorn if he ventured to show himself again. This much he fully believed, but no more. He could not suppose that the love which Colonel Mannerling had lost would ever be bestowed on another, least of all on himself. He felt that there was an impassable gulf between them. She had had the misfortune to be fascinated by a man totally unworthy of her, and had committed the sin of marrying Ralph notwithstanding her passion for Mannerling. But Ralph pleaded for her in his heart, knowing that she had only given her consent under pressure from all sides, and that she had warned him of the possible consequences. He felt therefore that she had been as much sinned against as sinning. He himself had wronged her by insisting upon marrying her, although he knew that she was fond of Colonel Mannerling. He had further wronged her by exposing her to the Colonel's attentions after they were married. He ought to have put his foot down and stopped all intimacy from the beginning. He might have thus avoided the baneful results.

"I reckoned too much on my own powers," thought Ralph. "I was too conceited. I fancied that once married I should be able to drive this man's image from her heart and take its place. My vanity was overweening, my punishment has been great. Why should I suppose that I could make her love me better than that good-looking scoundrel? What has happened serves me

right. I can never expect her to be any more to me than she is now—a kind, attentive and gentle lady, looking after my house and receiving my friends. I have no right to blame her for what has happened."

And he was careful never to drop a hint nor a word which would possibly convey the slightest reproach, never to say anything which could by any means suggest that she had not behaved as a true, good wife. He was quiet and gentle in speaking to her, but seemed to assume as a matter of course that they could never be on nearer terms than those of cordial friendship. His nights were not sleepless like hers : for, as has been observed, he was a man of action rather than thought, and subjectivity was hateful to him. Yet even *his* sleep was often interrupted by sudden awakenings out of dreams—dreams of what might have been ; or of struggles in railway carriages, or steeplechases over rough ground. And neither he nor Diana foresaw any end to this estrangement and this tension.

After some persuasion from Ralph, Diana was at last induced to resume her riding habit and to appear once again with hounds. She had refused obstinately, until one morning, when they were alone, Ralph ventured to remark :

" Diana, I think it would be better for you to hunt, particularly on account of your neighbours. They remember how you used to ride in old times."

In this Diana saw an allusion to her gallops with Colonel Mannering, and a hint that her escapade had become known, been whispered, talked about. That was quite enough. She at once declared herself ready to go out on the first day that hounds were handy, and only an opportune frost prevented Sir Henry Branscombe risking his neck still sooner. This frost was the most potent auxiliary that Sir Davenport Harley could have obtained. Nothing else would have prevented Sir Henry from going to the meet " just to see them throw off," as he said. But they all knew that if once he went to the meet he would be sure to follow. The frost, however, gave him a fortnight longer to recover, and during that fortnight he gained strength amazingly.

The physician was in so far right that the strength was bodily rather than mental. He could not remember recent events, and was constantly obliged to refer to Ralph on the most trivial matters. But his appetite was excellent, and he began to regain his slight portliness of figure.

But when the frost disappeared it became hopeless to keep the old gentleman from the hounds, and at last both Ralph and Diana had to admit that opposition would do him more harm than the gratification of his wish under proper precautions. Any contradiction threw him into paroxysms of passion, which alarmed them the more that in former times he had never exhibited any violent temper, and the only thing which used to move him was the mention of the Holborn Vale hounds. So when hounds were announced for Mersham Cross Roads—only five miles off—it was decided in council that Sir Henry should go. In any case it would have been difficult to prevent his doing so. For unless he was officially examined and found a lunatic, nobody had a right to prevent his ordering his own household, and deciding on his own movements. And he had practically resumed charge of his affairs, though he left the estate very much to Ralph. He often sent for Mr. Toms, and closeted himself with that gentleman for hours, exhibiting peevishness and temper if Ralph entered the room or made an inquiry into business matters. Yet all the time every one felt that the old baronet was quite unable to manage anything, and though Mr. Toms always declared that he was as acute as ever, no one believed that Mr. Toms thought so. Sir Henry never signed any cheques. The money required was handed to Ralph by Mr. Toms, so that in fact the young man had less control of money than ever. But the little financier had, it appears, given up the idea of interfering in the house and the stable. In the former Diana, in the latter Ralph, could do exactly as they pleased, though they felt much humiliated and annoyed at the tone adopted by Toms when he sent or handed them the sums for their weekly requirements.

It was a mild, muggy morning when they rode over to Mersham Cross Roads. Sir Henry declined the dog-cart, and started as usual

on Peterborough, whom he intended to hunt. As an additional precaution Ralph had mounted the stud groom on his own old Peabody, who was as good as gold when he was not allowed to eat his fill and do nothing. Thus there would be a quiet second horse handy in case of accident. Ralph rode a young chestnut—a horse Sir Henry had purchased on Boulter's recommendation about a year before—a powerful and showy animal, with high action, but one which seemed better adapted for a strong man under forty than for an old gentleman. Diana, of course, rode her own “Pet.” It was the first time that she had appeared in the field this season, and though apparently as calm as ever, she was nervous as to her reception. She did not guess what elaborate precautions Ralph had taken to avoid the faintest breath of scandal, nor did she imagine that even her own servants had been entirely satisfied by his version of the midnight journey. She thought that they all suspected her; she fancied that they regarded her with different eyes since that fatal night. Their demeanour might apparently be as respectful as ever, but in their hearts she thought they despised her. To so proud a woman as Diana the thought of being despised, or even suspected, by mere servants, was constant torture: a torture, too, she could confide to no one, least of all to Ralph.

When the master raised his hat, and greeted her with a frank expression of pleasure at seeing her out again, she fancied that she detected in his words some hidden allusion to the cause of her not having been out before; when the Hon. Seaton Delaval shook hands, and asked her whether she had been hunting elsewhere, she imagined that he must be hinting at her having been meeting Colonel Mannerling; and even the respectful words of the more distant farmers grated on her as if they implied a reproach for her previous conduct. Of course Saintsbury Snuffbox was at the Cross Roads, and equally of course he put his foot into it as much as he could. To Sir Henry he said, as if it had been the most cheering remark possible:

“ Well, Sir Henry, who'd have thought to see you out again! I'm sure when me and Mr. Fitzurse rode over to see Mr. Ralph,

'two months ago, we never thought you'd leave the 'All again, except feet foremost !'

To Diana he bowed most effusively, and rejoiced that she had come to see the "ounds."

"When will you give us Holborn Vale chaps a turn ?" he asked. "That was a niceish run last year, Miss Diana—I beg pardon, Mrs. Branscombe—when you and the Colonel was out. He rode straight enough, did that gentleman ; and hung out a beautiful boot, too. Where might he be now ? In the Shires, I suppose."

"Colonel Mannerling is abroad on foreign service," interposed Ralph, who had been hovering near, anxious to save his wife from any possible annoyance. "What sort of an entry have you got this year, Mr. Snuffbox ?"

This was a subject on which Snuffbox could enlarge to any extent, and he dashed through the gate Ralph thus held open for him, letting poor Diana alone. She felt more miserable than she would have thought it possible. Why should the idle remarks of a stupid man like Snuffbox cause her such anguish ? When they trotted off to draw the nearest wood, Ralph was sorely perplexed by a clashing of duties. He ought, he felt, to remain near his uncle, who might require help at any moment, but he did not like to leave Diana alone ; she, too, might require assistance, though of a different nature. And his difficulties were not diminished by the behaviour of the chestnut, who danced along sideways, snatched violently at the bit, and in every way showed an emphatic wish to get to the front. Neither Sir Henry nor Diana were particularly anxious to occupy a forward position. The former was happy, jogging along and talking with old friends whom he had not seen for so many months ; it would have been cruelty to disturb him. The latter was not desirous of showing prominently at all. But the chestnut was very keen, and Ralph was not able to devote much attention either to his wife or his uncle. Fortunately an ally turned up in his father. The Rev. George was quietly waiting for hounds at Bletchington, knowing that the covers first drawn from Mersham Cross Roads were

generally blank. Lazybones had had seven miles across country to take the superfluous steam out of him, for the reverend gentleman, though not quite as keen as his son, hated road-work, and always selected a line of gates and gaps to take him to hounds.

“Glad to see you, father,” exclaimed Ralph. “Awfully glad, for I can’t hold this brute, and I want you to look after my uncle and Diana.”

Of course the Rev. George joined his brother at once. Sir Henry was at first cool and rather suspicious, having faint recollections of the times when he had been asked for loans to assist the clergyman in bringing up his numerous family, and forgetting for the moment that the Rev. George had not for some years troubled him in that way. Diana, however, who had taken a great fancy to her father-in-law, was delighted to see him, and the three chatted quite gaily, till old Lazybones, whose ears had been in constant motion as he watched the hounds, suddenly gave a buck which nearly sent his master out of the saddle.

“They’ve found,” cried the clergyman. “Lazybones always knows it before any one else. They’re on a fox. This way. Come along, Henry, I know how to get round; he’s sure to break on the Park side, and there’s nothing but iron over there. Come along, Di !”

And away he hustled, forgetting all about his brother’s recent illness, and the caution which Ralph recommended him to observe. The latter, meanwhile, was tearing through the wood on his fiery steed, much to his own discomfort and that of his neighbours. His hat was torn off by an overhanging branch, and hung behind his back by the guard; his knees were bumped a dozen times against trees, and he felt that he would be lucky if he got out of covert without having his head smashed. Never would he take such a horse into a wood again! Why the beast had no more discretion than a pig, and went blundering along, keen to catch hounds, without thinking for a moment that he had a man on his back, and that there were many places high

enough and wide enough for a horse alone, but not high nor wide enough for horse and man both. As usual, too, there was a hog-backed stile at the end of the narrow path through the covert, and people were taking their turn at it quietly, popping over one by one without fuss, for the place was small, but the space being confined, rushing would have been fatal. "I beg your pardon," said Ralph, as he cannoned against one man's horse and pulled his own almost on to his haunches.

"Quiet, you brute; stand still; wait for your turn." But the chestnut was not to be denied, and after a short struggle, during which he knocked against, splashed, or otherwise annoyed about a dozen people, Ralph at last let him go at the stile, at the risk of riding right over a young farmer's son, who was taking his turn steadily enough. There was a yell, a scramble, and the chestnut sailed away with his head down, none the worse for the collision, while the farmer's son picked himself up, disconsolately looked at his hat, and gazed after the fast retreating figure. "Well," he muttered, "A shouldn't have thought A'd be ridden over by t' young Squire, howiver."

But there could be no doubt that such was the fact, and the "young Squire" was far too busy controlling his horse to look back and see how his victim was getting on.

Whether the fox was an old or a young one might be an open question, but at any rate he had gone away fast enough, and scent was good, while the ground was as holding as it only becomes after frost and snow, followed by a rapid thaw. The good folks who had followed the Rev. George had all the best of it, for he ran right handed, and the straight riders were obliged to make a big circuit by the wide park and the lower lodge before they could get on terms. The gallop just suited Ralph, for when once on the smooth turf he let his chestnut go just as fast as he liked, and passed the Hon. Seaton Delaval, Mr. Fetlock, and a few more who fancied themselves, just as if they had been standing still. The chestnut very nearly ran into the thick black thorn hedge, high as a house, which faced the lodge gates; but with a determined jerk Ralph saved himself from a bed of thorns,

and got him along the road to the right. Now he could hear the hounds, but he could not see them, and it was only after a couple of sticky turnip fields had been crossed that he was once more close to the pack. On his extreme right he recognised Sir Henry riding at a hand canter almost in line with Diana, while his father was showing them the way on old Lazybones, and the groom rode close behind the baronet, ready to help if wanted. This was a relief to him, and he could now watch the hounds without pre-occupation. They were dwelling on the edge of a ragged hedge, and the check let the body of the field up. But it was not a long one ; soon one and then another spoke to it and went streaming away over the soft pasture. Now all sat down to ride in earnest, and the gallant master smiled as he saw the very men who were always over-riding hounds when scent was poor, doing their best in vain to catch them. The chestnut was going better, but still pulling harder than Ralph liked, and he was horribly afraid of the brute rushing at some impossible place before he could stop him. However, as fence after fence was thrown behind them, his fears disappeared ; the chestnut went at his jumps with a boldness which charmed him ; there was no hesitation and no "stickiness ;" all Ralph had to do was to sit down and put his head straight at the obstacle. They ran down into the Vale country, and when the new horse had cleared a very big hedge protected by a ditch on the take-off side, Boulter rose in Ralph's estimation. He had recommended a good horse, anyhow, though it was certainly not quite the mount for old Sir Henry. That big hedge proved fatal to many. The chestnut had not made a gap, and there was some hesitation and considerable grief. Soon Ralph heard some one call, "Stop that horse," and the next moment a loose pony rushed past. He caught the rein with his hunting-crop, pulled up and looked back for the owner. No one on foot was visible, but the hard riders, bespattered with mud, galloped past poor Ralph in a way he did not like at all. No one even took the trouble to tell him whose the pony was. Here was good-nature ill-rewarded ! To lose such a run for the sake of some

Hurry up--or I shall let him go."



tailor! At last he perceived a lad coming slowly across the ploughed field. Ralph shouted at him: "Come and take your horse! hurry up or I shall let him go." The boy did not seem to appreciate the gravity of the situation. He came up quite slowly, while Ralph eagerly stooped to throw him the reins.

"Look here," said the youth, composedly, and not making any endeavour to relieve Ralph of his pony, "I'll tell you how it happened. It was that big hedge down there you know——."

"Confound you!" cried Ralph, angered out of his politeness; "I don't care a d—n how it happened. Hounds are running; catch hold of your pony, man, and don't stand jawing like a fool!"

"Rude beast," muttered the young man, as he endeavoured to hoist himself into the saddle. "As if I'd fallen on purpose. Some fellows have no manners at all. He need not have been in such a hurry. Hounds are sure to stop directly."

But they did not stop. Ralph had his work cut out before he caught them, and before he caught them the chestnut had pretty well done pulling. There was, however, no faltering and no hesitation. Ralph felt a little doubtful about a post and rails, which now alone separated him from the hounds. It was not a nice place for a tired horse to jump. But before he could make up his mind to go through Shuffler's Gate the horse decided the matter for him, by pricking up his ears and going for the rails in a thoroughly workmanlike manner. Though covered with foam and almost blown, he jumped them handsomely. Ralph nearly began to think that Boulter might be honest after all.

They had now, however, come to slow hunting, and in a few minutes, after a check, the hounds eagerly crowded round a hole in the bank. There was no doubt of it, the fox had gone to ground after a good thirty minutes, of which twenty had been very fast indeed. Soon a semicircle formed round Reynard's retreat, and mutual compliments (or chaff) were as usual exchanged. Sir Henry, very red in the face and trembling, was highly pleased, and kept repeating: "Capital run, eh! capital run. Never saw a better."

When Ralph rode up to his uncle, he thought that the old gentleman seemed to be staring very intently at some object on the other side of the hedge.

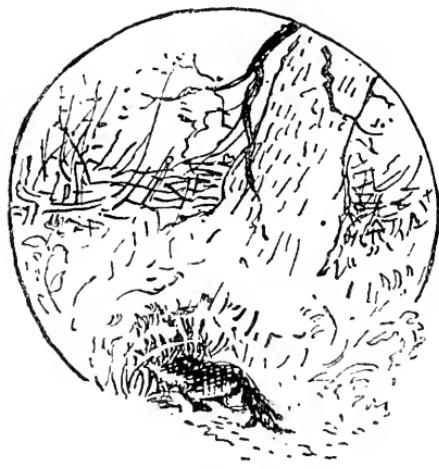
"How did you enjoy it, uncle?" he asked. "Did Peterboro' carry you well? It is a pity the fox has gone to ground, is it not?"

"Capital run, capital run," repeated Sir Henry, still staring across the hedge, and in a peculiar tone of voice, which appeared to get gradually weaker. "Capital run; ea-pit-al—ru—."

And suddenly, before any one could help, he fell from his horse in one inert mass, with a dull thud.

In a minute a dozen willing arms were lifting him up, and supporting him, while a dozen voices shouted for Dr. Quayle.

"Too late," said the little doctor, lifting his head after he had examined the patient. "Too late, the action of the heart has entirely stopped. He is quite dead."



CHAPTER XXXII.

BEFORE READING THE WILL.



RECTORY was very quiet on the day after poor Sir Henry's sudden end. The blinds were drawn, the gate was closed, and the place was so still in the subdued afternoon light that it looked like a deserted house. The Rev. George—now

Sir George—Branscombe was at the Hall, performing those duties with respect to funeral arrangements and other painful matters which always and naturally fall to the lot of male relatives. Mrs. Branscombe was with her daughters in the large schoolroom at the back of the house, consulting about mourning, and cutting out black merino and horrible crape. Mrs. Branscombe was not the sort of woman to allow grief to interfere with her very exact notions of propriety in dress and economy in her household. It would not do for the girls to be seen about much at such a sad time, and how better could they show their respect for their departed uncle than by making their own mourning frocks? Poor Sir Henry had not been very fond of his sister-in-law, although his thorough goodness and his inborn courtesy had always ensured her the kindest reception at the Hall. But Mrs. Branscombe knew well that she was not a favourite there, and the frequent long visits of Mr. and Mrs.

Throgmorton Toms were noticed by her, and commented on, in no friendly spirit. In fact it will be remembered that it was a letter from his mother which chiefly caused Ralph's hasty return from abroad in the previous spring. So while Mrs. Branscombe, or, we should say, Lady Branscombe, was cutting out, and contriving, and planning, her thoughts often wandered to the Hall, and she strove with but scant success to conceal her anxiety as to the disposition of the property.

There was little conversation. The girls were hemming, snipping, tacking, and otherwise carrying out their mother's orders. The stillness was only disturbed by an occasional question: "Will this do, *Regina*?" or by a request such as: "Just hold out your arm, *Mary*," "Please pass the scissors." The mother occasionally put down her work to think and sigh, and even the younger girls were subdued to the occasion. They wondered whether they would have enough money in future to buy dresses like the *Misses Panll*, and whether they would have a carriage. Then suddenly the quiet was rudely interrupted by a loud peal at the bell. They all started. "Some one come to enquire, I suppose," remarked Lady Branscombe. "Go on with your work, girls." But the peal was evidently not caused by an ordinary visitor, for it was followed by the crunching of wheels on the short drive and by a conversation in the passage. Of course *Mary* wanted to go out and see what was the matter, but her mother sternly bade her remain in the room. Were they not supposed to be each and all in their respective bedrooms, clothed in sackcloth and ashes, and weeping gallons of tears? The conversation outside was prolonged and grew more animated. Suddenly Lady Branscombe dropped her work and exclaimed with a look of horror, "Good gracious, it's *Janet*!"

And the next moment the door burst open, and Miss Nettle-rash walked in.

"My dear *Maud*, you really are *most* unfortunate in your servants! Why that girl actually tried to drive me away from my own sister's door! My poor children," continued the elderly spinster, kissing her nieces effusively, and wiping her eyes

between the kisses, "how are you all? Of course I packed up and came away as soon as I heard. Poor Sir Henry! How did it happen, Maud?"

"Packed up?" asked Lady Branscombe, in amazement.

"Yes, of course. You would not expect me to come here without any clothes, would you? I find the old black merino will do very well for the present, with new crape sewn on to it, and I bought the few things I want on my way here. Which room am I to have, Maud? One of the girls might see my box taken upstairs."

The Rector's wife was thoroughly taken aback.

"Are you going to stop here, Janet?" she gasped.

"Stop? Well, of course I am. Am I the sort of woman to leave my lawful sister alone in all her distress? I knew you would want me."

"But I have the girls, Janet, and I really don't know whether we can find room for you."

Up went Miss Janet's nose.

"Find room for me? In a house like this, where I know you have three spare bedrooms? I must say, I never expected to be treated in this way by my only sister. Do you turn me out, then? Say so at once, and don't be a hypocrite."

Lady Branscombe could not summon courage to answer such a question in the affirmative. When boldly challenged by her pugnacious sister she generally gave way for the sake of peace and quietness.

"Of course not, Janet," she replied; "do not be foolish. We will get a room ready for you. But I do not think you will be very comfortable just now. You see we are very busy, and of course George and Ralph are constantly at the Hall."

"That is only a civil way of saying that I am not wanted. Maud, you must forgive me for telling you that you do not set your children a good example of respect to their aunt. However, let Regina show me my room."

"Please, miss," said the parlour-maid, putting her head in, "the flyman says his fare is half-a-crown, and a shilling for

waiting at the shops. That's three and six, and he won't go away."

"What a cheat!" exclaimed Miss Nettlerash. "Waiting, indeed! Why I only stopped a moment at the draper's to get some crape, and some black ribbon, and some thread and silk, and a little lining! Half-a-crown is plenty. I won't give him any more."

The maid went out with this unsatisfactory message, but the flyman refused to move. He remained on the door-step arguing in no very subdued tones, and his language was gradually but surely deteriorating. If there was one thing the Rector's wife hated more than another, it was a noise on her door-step, which was within sight and hearing of all the passers-by on the main road. And at this particular time, such a scene was beyond measure distressing to her.

"For goodness sake, settle with the man, Janet," she said. "Really I cannot have a disturbance at the door just now."

"As if *I* were making the disturbance! Blame your own parishioner for it; it is not my doing. If George cannot inspire his people with better notions of honesty than that, I am sorry for him and for them. I shan't give him another penny, even if he stops there all night."

And with these words the old lady turned to ascend the stairs. For once, Lady Branscombe's anxiety for peace and quiet overmastered her strict economy. She gave the flyman a shilling and sent him on his way, but treasured up one more grievance against her sister, to be avenged with interest some day, though, of course, politely, for Lady Branscombe was always polite.

Meanwhile matters at the Hall had not gone on as quietly as decorum required. Mr. Throgmorton Toms arrived there almost at the same time as Miss Nettlerash reached the Rectory. He was accompanied by a lean, dark, and clean-shaven gentleman, whom he at once introduced to Sir George and Ralph as Mr. James Bones, of Pickum, Bones & Co.

"I thought it necessary to come at once, dear Sir George," said Toms sweetly to the Rector, laying an emphasis on the

title, "because, you know, my dear friend who has gone asked me to be one of his executors, and this gentleman drew up the will."

Mr. Toms stopped, as if suffocated by sobs. Wiping his (perfectly dry) eyes, he proceeded :

"I thought it necessary that Mr. Bones should tell you whether the will contained any instructions about poor Sir Henry's last resting place, or his funeral."

Ralph was aghast. He had always expected that Mr. Toms would be an executor, but he had never thought that his uncle would have allowed a member of such a firm as Pickum, Bones, & Co. to draw up his will. He had at once telegraphed for Mr. Inkstone.

"The late Sir Henry," began Mr. James Bones, "left no directions about his funeral. He wished, I believe, to be interred in Warboro' churchyard, but the manner of doing so was left to the discretion of the survivors. I have brought the late Sir Henry's last will and testament with me, and with your permission, Mr. Toms, and yours, Sir George (turning to the Rector), will communicate its contents after the funeral."

There being no objection to this course, Mr. James Bones wisely returned to town as soon as the day of the funeral had been arranged. Mr. Toms announced that he would remain at the Hall, and though his presence was quite as unwelcome to Ralph as Miss Janet's was to his mother, there was no help for it. Since Diana's escapade, there had on no occasion been so much sympathy between herself and Ralph as on the evening following poor Sir Henry's fatal gallop. Both were equally disgusted with Mr. Toms, who talked almost unceasingly of Sir Henry's virtues and his kindness, the flow of words being interrupted only by sobs and tears, which the little man assured them he was unable to repress. When, after a short and melancholy dinner, Diana retired, Mr. Toms began to address himself especially to Ralph.

"I am very, very sorry for you, Ralph," he said.

"Why the deuce should *he* be sorry for me!" thought Ralph. But he did not reply.

"I am afraid it will make a great difference to you," continued Mr. Toms.

"Of course," assented Ralph.

"He was a wonderfully generous man," the financier went on, "and particularly kind to *you*." And then he buried his face in his pocket-handkerchief.

"He was very good to me," grunted Ralph.

"Yes," said Mr. Toms, removing his pocket-handkerchief from his face, and sipping some of Sir Henry's Château Margaux. "It was very good of him to give you that twelve hundred pounds."

"Very," was all Ralph felt inclined to answer.

"Extraordinarily kind. Few uncles would have done it, considering that you were hardly ever out of a scrape since you left school."

There was nothing to answer to this, though Ralph felt that he was rapidly getting angry. There is nothing so thoroughly exasperating as the truth put in a disagreeable way. Mr. Toms wiped his eyes once more, and then proceeded :

"You *have* made a mess of it, Ralph! What a pity you wasted your opportunities. I used to do all I could for you with Sir Henry."

"Indeed?" growled Ralph, getting hotter and hotter.

"Yes. He was very vexed with you over and over again. If it had not been for me you would never have got that twelve hundred, nor the five hundred he gave you last year."

Ralph would have liked to say, "What an infernal lie!" but out of respect for his poor uncle, who was lying dead upstairs, he held his peace.

"You *have* misunderstood me throughout, Ralph," and the little man waxed sentimental. His voice was choked by real sobs as he stammered out: "You never knew what a friend you had in me. You thought—I—was—working—against you, and I was—always doing my best—for you." And at last he really burst into tears.

Had Ralph after all misjudged him? Was the fellow

better than he looked, and than his previous conduct indicated? Perhaps it was a mistake after all. Perhaps Mr. Toms had really done his best both for his uncle and for Ralph, neglecting his own interests.

"But," resumed Toms, gradually regaining his composure, "you never will know all I did for you and Diana. I have worked without the slightest regard for my own interests. I have slaved for Sir Henry, and tried to get him out of his messes——"

"Messes?" inquired Ralph, curiously.

"Yes. Did you not guess? He was always getting into messes. Of course you must have known that when we worked through all that city business together. My mouth was closed then; I could not tell you anything. You fancied that *I* had got his affairs into confusion. Not a bit of it. He did it all himself, and I could not control him at all."

Ralph did not know what to make of it.

When they returned to the drawing-room they found that Diana had retired. Since that dreadful night Ralph had never entered her room, but to-day he left Toms downstairs, and knocked at his wife's door.

She was sitting at the fire, looking sadly into the glowing embers.

"I have come, Diana," he said, "to tell you about Toms." And he related his conversation with the financier. When he had finished he asked his wife what she thought.

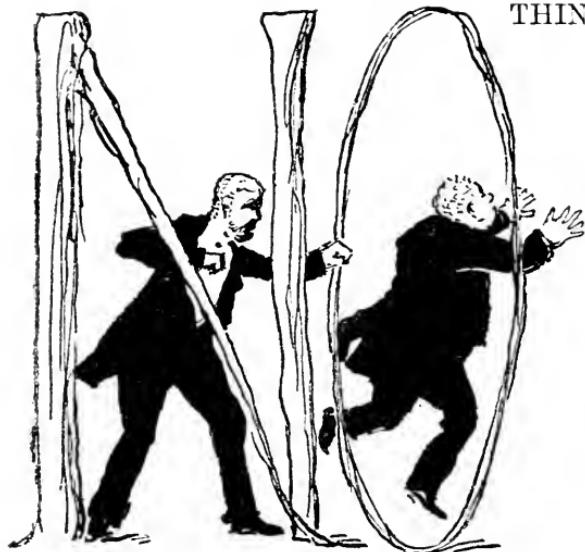
"Poor uncle!" she said, softly, after a few minutes' reflection. "No, Ralph," she went on, "I do *not* believe him. I have lived with Uncle Henry nearly all my life, and I would not weigh Toms' words against my uncle's deeds. He is a humbug."

"But he was really crying," remarked Ralph.

"Oh, I dare say. Some people can cry when they like, and others," she added, slowly, "cannot cry, even though their heart is bursting.—Good night, Ralph."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AFTER READING THE WILL.



THING her sister could say or do suffice to prevent Miss Nettlerash from driving over next morning to call on Diana. Lady Branscombe had not forgotten the scene in her drawing-room when Ralph's engagement was announced, nearly a year ago, and she was well aware that her

daughter-in-law had not seen Miss Janet since. But all her efforts to deter her sister proved unavailing. "It is my duty, and I will," was her refrain, and she carried out what she thought her duty like the strong-minded woman she fancied herself to be. Lady Branscombe could not muster courage to accompany her. She so hated anything approaching a scene, that she was really afraid to go. So Sir George had to act as escort, and it must be confessed that the reverend gentleman gave his sister-in-law the slip as soon as he had seen her safely into the deserted drawing-room at the Hall.

Lady Branscombe, however, need not have been afraid. Her own sins and the recent bereavement had not been without their effect on Diana. She heard the announcement of her visitor's name with surprise indeed, but not with the aversion she would have shown a few months back. She was ready to bear

her share of being condoled with by her own and her husband's relatives, and accepted Miss Nettlerash's visit as part of the business which must be gone through. The men, she knew, had the worst portion of the many sad functions inseparable from death ; she was prepared to do her part as became Ralph Branscombe's wife. Therefore she held out her hand to Miss Nettlerash, without any special feeling beyond that she was performing a disagreeable but necessary duty. She was the more surprised that the old lady should clasp her in her skinny arms, while the black grapes and bugles which now decorated her bonnet, shivered and jingled with the vigour of the kiss pressed on Diana's unwilling lips.

“ Why, how ill you look, Diana ! ” exclaimed Miss Nettlerash. “ And no wonder, with this sad loss and all this worry ! Sit down and tell me all about it, dear.”

Diana was the last person in the world to tell anyone all about it, and Miss Nettlerash the last person in the world in whom she would have confided. But the old lady was in a sympathetic and patient mood, and besides, she “ wanted to know.” When she had a fit of curiosity nothing ever stopped her. So neither Diana's coldness nor her reserve prevented Miss Nettlerash from pouring out her sympathy, asking question after question. “ How long was the attack ? how did it begin ? what were the symptoms ? what medicines did Sir Davenport Harley prescribe ? who was with him ? who brought him home from the hunting field ? ” These and many other queries were interspersed with expressions of genuine sorrow and bursts of real feeling. Miss Nettlerash was truly too much affected by the solemn sadness of the house, and by Diana's wan face, to think of asking what she had firmly intended to ask—whether anything was known of Sir Henry's will ? This she forgot, fortunately for Diana, but she did not forget to thank Diana for her kindness to Marian. It will be remembered that Marian had been very discreet about her visit, and Miss Nettlerash, of course, supposed that she had been received and made comfortable by the lady of the house. Diana blushed hotly, when Miss Janet spoke of that sadly memorable night ; but the next moment, finding how well her

secret had been kept, she felt one more reason to be grateful to Ralph, whose thoughtfulness had extended as far as Silverstone, and had prevented any gossip reaching his aunt's house, which generally acted on all the scandal within thirty miles round like a powerful magnet on steel filings.

At last, to Diana's relief, Miss Nettlerash rose to go, and again a hearty kiss resounded, and the bugles clinked. Both ladies had been somewhat softened by the conversation. Diana confessed to herself that Miss Nettlerash was not quite so bad as she thought, and evidently meant to be kind, while the old spinster was quite delighted with Diana's gentle and subdued ways, which she thought were very different to her former dashing, flirty manners. Nor did she fail to express her satisfaction pretty clearly to Lady Branscombe, notwithstanding the presence of the girls. For it must be admitted, that if Janet had no hesitation in criticizing with a frankness often disagreeable, she was equally willing to praise when she was pleased; and on the whole her praise was harder to put up with than her blame. Lady Branscombe hinted as gently as she could, that Marian must be dull without her, and that it would surely be more comfortable for her to return to Silverstone until the funeral. But Miss Nettlerash at once fired up. "You need not be anxious about Marian," she said. "Her father and mother are staying at my house while I am away. I suppose you want me to go. Why don't you say so instead of beating about the bush? I will go now, if you like, as I have paid my visit to Diana. Only you must never expect me to come again, for I won't go where I am not wanted!"

Lady Branscombe covered a hasty retreat under muttered apologies. Her sister's frankness was always somewhat disconcerting. And Miss Janet proceeded to make herself comfortable at the Rectory, while the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson was doing the same at Silverstone. There was an alarming diminution of Miss Nettlerash's port during her absence, and Mrs. Dawson in vain endeavoured to check a consumption which she feared might lead to discovery and disgrace.

Sir Henry Branscombe's funeral was attended by all the country side. The worthy baronet's popularity had scarcely suffered even a check during his illness, as Ralph had done all that lay in his power to carry on everything just as his uncle had done. So the tenants mustered in full force, and the neighbours came from far and near, and the row of carriages was almost interminable, and the respect shown to the deceased was not confined to mere show. The farmers' wives, and the women and children of Branscombe and Warboro' were sobbing as if their hearts would break, while many of the men were almost equally affected, though they showed their grief in a less demonstrative manner. Mr. Paull and his son, young Egerton, were old friends of the family, and of course came early; and even Saintsbury Snuffbox, though he had had differences of opinion with Sir Henry, as he admitted, was lavish in his encomiums on the virtues of the departed. "If he'd lived another year, sir," he said to Mr. Fetlock, "the Bart would have ridden to our hounds, sir; I know he would. He was a fine sportsman, was the Bart." Snuffbox always spake of Sir Henry as "the Bart" when he wished to be friendly. When Mr. Paull, the last of the friends, had gone, Mr. Inkstone, Sir George, Ralph, and Mr. Toms, met in the "justice room," where Mr. James Bones, who had of course attended the funeral, was waiting for them. He produced Sir Henry's will, which was duly written and engrossed in the most correct style, on parchment, and bore date of the previous April.

"Shall I read it out in full, gentlemen, or would you be satisfied to hear the chief conditions?"

"Oh, the principal points are enough," said Mr. Toms.

"Better read it in full," suggested Sir George. And this, accordingly, was done. It was a long, an unnecessarily long document. Stripped of legal verbiage it amounted to the following:—Sir Henry's real property, consisting of the Branscombe estate, with all its appurtenances, and a few outlying cottages, were left to Ralph, subject to such mortgages as might at the time of his death still be in force. To the Rev. George Branscombe he left the life interest of ten thousand pounds, with

remainder to his children absolutely in such shares as he might appoint. To Mrs. Armit, Pringle the butler, Boulter, and various other servants, he left liberal legacies. The whole of the remainder of his property, personal or otherwise, was for Mr. Throgmorton Toms absolutely. The executors were Mr. Throgmorton Toms and Mr. James Bones. Diana was not even mentioned.

Mr. Inkstone asked to look at the will, and then returned it to Mr. Bones without remark.

It was some little time before Ralph and his father quite realised the effect of this document. But by the time the autumn twilight had come on, father and son had pretty well agreed about it. Branscombe was a fine estate, but the rent-roll did not exceed five thousand a year, even when the rents were paid punctually in full. Ralph knew well that in recent years his uncle had only obtained four thousand from it; in fact, had not some valuable ores been opened up on the other side of the Downs, the revenue would not have attained much more than half that figure. As a result, Branscombe barely paid its way, for no one could keep up the Hall even respectably under four thousand a year, and then only by very careful management. But Ralph had also learned that there were heavy mortgages on the land, and though he had not at the moment all the figures before him, he estimated the mere interest at over two thousand a year. Two thousand was, therefore, all that was left, and on this income it was impossible to live at Branscombe Hall.

Still less could Sir George carry on the establishment. He looked upon the ten thousand left to him as a provision for his daughters, and though the interest of this money was a valuable addition to his income, it was totally insufficient to justify his giving up his living.

Where was all the rest? In the hands of Mr. Throgmorton Toms. How much this residue amounted to was entirely a matter of conjecture. Mr. Inkstone thought half a million; Sir George guessed it at two hundred thousand: Ralph, too, estimated it as at least that amount. At any rate, it was a very large sum; the result of the late Baronet's long, active,

and careful business life. So much Ralph knew from his investigations in London. And both father and son came to the conclusion that Mr. Toms had played his cards too well. Ralph was now poorer than ever, for when a bachelor he had only himself to provide for, and received a handsome allowance from his uncle, in addition to frequent assistance, and a salary from Brown, Holland, & Co.

“What shall you do, Ralph?” asked Sir George.

“I don’t know. He was not in his right mind when he made that will.”

“Certainly not,” said the Rector. “Shall we attack it?”

“I don’t know,” replied Ralph. “I wish Inkstone had not gone away in such a hurry.” For the lawyer had left for London on important business.

At that moment the servant brought in lights. He was followed by Mr. Toms.

That gentleman came in quite calmly, and without any apparent hesitation said :

“Sir George and Ralph, I shall be very glad to do anything I can for you. Please command me if you want anything. I know the City, and may be useful to you.” And he pursed up his little round mouth in the peculiar style he adopted when he wished to be winning and persuasive.

While Mr. Toms was speaking, Ralph’s brow grew dark.

“What on earth do you mean, Mr. Toms, by coming to us as if nothing had happened?” he asked, controlling himself with great difficulty. “Do you forget what we were told only two hours ago? You don’t seem to realise that my poor uncle’s will makes me almost a pauper, and that you have been enriched at our expense!”

“It is not so bad as all that, Ralph,” replied Mr. Toms, still keeping his mouth as round as possible. “Branscombe will still be worth a very handsome income after subtracting all charges. Besides, on my word of honour, I did all I could to prevent his making me residuary legatee.”

“You liar!” interrupted Ralph.

“Ralph, be quiet!” called out Sir George, alarmed.

The little financier flushed up, but said, quietly enough :

“ Ralph, I am sorry to hear you use such strong, and, let me add, totally unjustifiable language. I have always regretted that you exercised so little control over your passions. I can only repeat, that had it not been for me, you would probably not have been treated so handsomely.”

“ You blackguard !” now exclaimed Ralph, quite unable any longer to control himself. “ How dare you speak to us like that, after you have robbed us of our inheritance ? ”

“ Ralph, Ralph, be quiet !” interrupted Sir George.

“ Oh, Sir George, I am not surprised. I never expected anything but the basest ingratitude from your son, whom I have helped time out of mind. Why, only a few months ago, in this very room, I lent him two hundred pounds, without any security whatever. And I persuaded good Sir Henry to help him out of his sinful scrapes, often, and many a time. Poor, good, generous man ! ” And Mr. Toms wiped his eyes. “ That this fine estate should go to such a reprobate is most distressing. I now repent that I did not open Sir Henry’s eyes to his real character. May your wicked heart be softened is my only prayer, young man.”

“ You rogue—you arch hypocrite ! ” shouted Ralph ; “ if you were not such a miserable, mean little wretch I would knock your teeth down your lying throat—— ”

“ Stop, Ralph, stop ! ” cried his father, jumping up, and laying a hand on his shoulder. But Ralph shook it off, and advanced towards Toms in a menacing attitude :

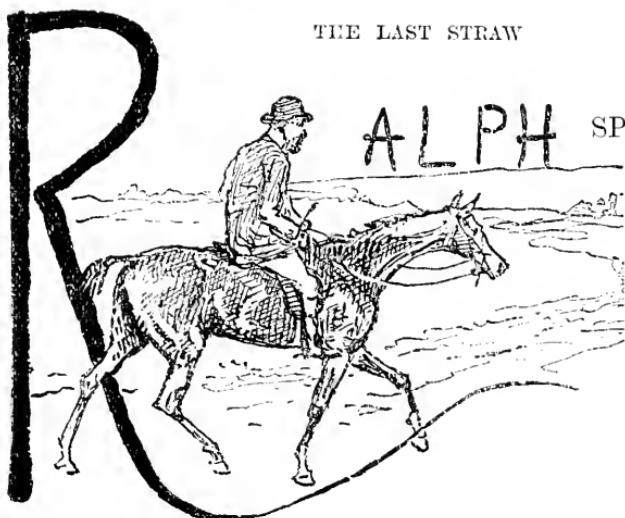
“ Get out of this place, you scoundrel ! ” he cried. “ At any rate, this is *my* house, and you shall not dirty it any longer with your presence, you hound. Do you recollect the El Dorado gold mining swindle ? ”

Mr. Toms rapidly retreated towards the door, which he quickly opened. When he was on the safe side of it, he put his head in again, and said, his voice choked with emotion :

“ Farewell, Sir George ; I shall not trouble your son again.” And, deeply moved, the good little man quickly slammed the door, and made a bolt of it.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LAST STRAW



SPENT the next two days in misery and doubt. What should he do? He was unwilling to consult Diana, though she was so much concerned in

the decision. When a man's wife has run away with some one else, and has been brought back almost by force, he is not likely to turn to her in his difficulties. He was bitterly disappointed. He had hoped and expected that a handsome provision would be made for his father, whom he loved, and that the remainder would be left to him, to enable him to keep up the estate, improve it, and in time enter the field of polities in which he desired to acquire distinction. Since Diana's escapade his home was scarcely a home to him, and he had looked forward to an active life divided between business and sport, to divert him from domestic troubles if it could not entirely console him. Sir Henry had been a justice of the peace; of course Ralph expected to be placed on the Bench in his uncle's stead. He had cherished the prospect of an active and useful life, if not of a happy one, but the activity, the usefulness, and the pleasures were all connected with Branscombe Hall and Warboro'. To keep the farms

up as well as his uncle had done, to develop the mines, to assist local hospitals and dispensaries, to become in time member for Warboro', and perhaps, some day, to take office under the Conservative Government which must sooner or later succeed to the Radical administration of the time; these were his dreams of work. To ride good horses, to support the Bankshire hounds, and possibly to succeed Mr. Shorthouse, who was gradually getting old, to keep a few steeple-chasers and perhaps to train a good colt or two for Newmarket; these were his visions of pleasure. All were dashed to the ground by his uncle's will. Mediocrity was before him; that mediocrity he detested more than anything. To go abroad and live on the nett income left him was to tear up all old associations by the roots and to destroy all future hopes, to sink into a slough of inaction and middlingness. To return to Brown, Holland, & Co. was to resume irksome and mechanical work for a very insufficient reward, and besides, would necessitate living in London, which he feared for the sake of Diana. Who knows whether the solitude of her life and the long days she must spend thrown on her own resources, might not expose her to fresh, if not to the old temptations? Ralph was now too old to enter the public service by the usual roads, and he who might have obtained for him one of those few posts still bestowed by patronage was gone.

The prospect was dreary indeed, and Ralph rode over to the Rectory in the worst possible spirits. They were not raised by his father's brief and subdued account of Warboro' gossip. He felt that another plank in his platform—his popularity in the county—was sinking from under him. In despair he cried at last:

“I shall attack the will, father! He was not in his right mind when he made it. It is absurd.”

“My dear boy, what chance have we, if we do?” asked Sir George.

“Every chance,” replied Ralph, hotly. “Why it is notorious that before he was ill my uncle meant you, Diana, and myself

to have the whole of his property. The new will was made while he was actually insane. None but a madman would have left you ten thousand pounds to keep up the title, none but a madman would have allowed that blackguard Toms to play ducks and drakes with the property."

"It is all very well," answered the clergyman after a few seconds' thought, "for *us* to feel convinced that my poor brother was not in his right senses. But it is a different matter to convince a judge and jury. Is that possible?"

"Certainly," Ralph declared; "there can be no doubt of it."

"Think of the scandal, and of the expense if we fail," objected Sir George.

"Scandal!" exclaimed his son warmly, "that little beast has done his worst already. I am not afraid of scandal. As to expenses, what does it matter whether I have two thousand a year out of the estate, or only one? We cannot live there, anyhow."

"I suppose not. But it is a matter neither you nor I can decide. You ought to consult Penner & Inkstone."

"Old stupid!" cried Ralph. "If they had been half sharp nothing like this would have happened." And in his anger he forgot that the family lawyers had brought him back from Italy, and that it was they who had first warned him of what was going on. But in the result he agreed to follow his father's advice, and to go to town next day to consult the old firm.

At home, in the evening, Diana after many misgivings timidly asked him what he proposed doing. She felt that she had lost the right to influence his decisions, and that she could no longer expect to be consulted on every important matter. But since Ralph had come into her room, a few days before, to tell her about Mr. Throgmorton Toms, she ventured, with much hesitation, to ask him about his views for the future. Poor Diana had, however, chosen an unfortunate moment. The evening's post had brought a letter from the bank which was, in fact, just

what Ralph had expected, only he did not expect it so soon. There was scarcely any ready money left, and Mr. Toms would certainly not supply any more. This letter, and a few other reminders, had spoiled his temper entirely. So he answered more roughly than he had ever spoken before :

“ What I am going to do? What other paupers do, I suppose. Go abroad somewhere, and hide. There will be enough left for you to live in town and enjoy yourself with your military friends.”

It was a cruel, almost a brutal answer. Hardly was it spoken before Ralph would gladly have bitten his tongue off. But it was too late. Diana turned pale—almost livid—and then flushed up suddenly to the roots of her hair. She felt as if a sharp knife had been mercilessly thrust into her heart. She had fondly hoped that her husband was gradually and gently opening again to her that door of his confidence which she had herself foolishly and wickedly closed. She had begun to believe that some day, however distant, she might by repentance regain the position she had herself forfeited. A faint ray of light—very faint and very remote—had illumined her path, and she had gained fresh courage from it, had shaken off despondency, and had striven to take a new interest in his and her life. Now that door was suddenly slammed in her face; a cruel sarcasm was launched at her; that light was extinguished, and she was cast back into the darkness of despair. The blow was all the harder that it was not undeserved. She silently and swiftly left the room, and once more sat down by her own fire with that stony, hopeless look in her eyes, which Ralph had noticed on the days immediately following her flight. And he suffered almost as acutely as she did. He would have given anything to withdraw those words, to have made them unsaid. Why did he not throw himself before her and prevent her leaving the room? Why did he not cry out loudly what was in his heart: “ Forgive me, Diana! I did not mean it; I was out of temper, mad? ” But the moment was past, the opportunity lost. He heard Diana shut herself up, and he knew that he had committed a crime





which he had not the courage to atone for at once and on the spot.

That night brought little sleep to Ralph, and none to Diana. She did not toss wearily on her pillow, as persons are generally supposed to do when worried and anxious. Her thoughts were too absorbing for her to seek for rest. They were concentrated on one object, and one alone: how to make this blow easier for Ralph to bear. His words showed that he cared nothing for her; that was of course natural. How could he, after what she had done? It was almost generous of him to think of providing for her at all. It would serve her right to be cast out like Hagar, without an Ishmael to relieve her solitude. It was the first time since that horrible night that he had alluded to her misconduct in any way whatever. Now she, by her foolish question, had brought that bitter reproof on herself. What right had she to ask him about his future plans? She had been a false wife to him, and he was giving her the shelter of his house and name out of pity, out of generosity. She ought to have humbly submitted to everything he chose to do, without a question. Aye! even when he spoke those bitter words, she should have fallen at his feet and begged his pardon for having caused them. Soon her self-reproaches went so far that she began to consider herself guilty of Sir Henry's will. No doubt her uncle had heard all about Colonel Mannerling, through Mr. Toms, and had intended to punish her. No doubt he had foreseen that she would make Ralph miserable, and had decided to provide for Ralph alone. Two thousand a-year was plenty for him; he could, as a bachelor, live comfortably on it, hunt as much as he liked, and enter Parliament, which she knew was his ambition. A false wife would only be a drag on him. The income which was so ample for Ralph alone was nothing for them both. It was her fault, hers alone, that it was so small. Before morning her resolution was taken.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A DEAL.



MR. Toms was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet. He hastened to complete all necessary arrangements for retiring from the City. Knowing, as he did, the contents of Sir Henry's testament long before the worthy baronet's death, Mr. Toms had been for months preparing for his elevation into a higher sphere. Every share in the Eldorado Gold Co. had long ago been disposed of, and when in the course of nature, a few months later, that swindle had died a natural death, and was "compulsorily wound up," Mr. Toms was no longer on the list of contributors, and the mahogany portals in Throgmorton Street had for many weeks not swung back to his small but pompous pressure. Mr. Toms always knew when to get out of things. Some of them he had "unloaded" on Sir Henry's broad shoulders during the baronet's illness. Others he had disposed of to the few confiding friends he still possessed. In some cases he had not hesitated to sacrifice a few hundreds in order to get clear for ever of doubtful ventures. As to the greater portion of his shares he sold them while they were high, but not at the highest point. If he could make a fair profit and relieve himself of all future responsibility he always did so at once, and never waited in the expectation of a further rise. Mr. Toms seldom made very large *cousps*; he was satisfied with a number of moderate ones. And although his companies one and all came to a bad end sooner

or later, the end never came while he was still concerned in them. On the contrary, as long as Mr. Toms was at the head of affairs they flourished exceedingly—at any rate, on paper. Large dividends were declared, and still larger ones promised. The shares were at a premium. Gradually Mr. Toms' holding would be reduced to his qualification. Then one fine day he would resign on account of some trifling difference of opinion, or because he was so busy in other directions, or because he was ill, or because his friend Sir Henry Branscombe was ill and wanted him at the Hall. Specious excuses were never wanting. A few weeks or months later the shares would unaccountably begin to drop, at first slowly, with occasional recoveries, and then faster; and a paragraph would appear in some paper, saying that “since the X. Y. Z. Co. (Limited) had lost the valuable services of Mr. Throgmorton Toms on the Board, its affairs had been less flourishing than heretofore.” After that the crash was not long delayed. Though some people declared that a couple of his companies were still in existence, the Eldorado Gold Company (Limited) was the last, though not the least, of Mr. Toms' City ventures.

As soon as this magnificent speculation was successfully launched, as soon as a director, more complaisant than Ralph, had sent home glowing accounts of the gold and jewels discovered in Utopia, Mr. Throgmorton Toms gradually drew all his irons out of the fire. Sir Henry's apparent return to health had somewhat disconcerted his plans, for it was possible that the old gentleman might, almost at any moment, remember the contents of the will he made in April, revoke them, and make a new one. But Mr. Throgmorton Toms' expectations were verified at last. He had attained his object. He was sorry that Branscombe Hall was not included in the handsome residuum left to him; but with the cash at his command nothing was impossible. His operations in the City, extending as they had done over twelve years, had made him a wealthy man; what was now his made him a very rich one. Mrs. Throgmorton Toms had always been a woman of the world; she would now be a woman

of fashion. Her afternoons and her dinners should be the talk of London. She would open a *salon*. Mr. Throgmorton Toms had always been considered a clever financier, he would now become a country gentleman, and the City should be forgotten. He would join the Four-in-Hand Club, and his drag should be the admiration of the people and the envy of his former equals. He would give sumptuous luncheons at Ascot, and collect round his little person the cream of sporting society. At his country mansion, wherever it was, he would entertain nothing but the very best people. Mrs. Throgmorton Toms would be the elegant, fashionable, and cultivated hostess ; he would be the affable, frank, and hospitable country squire of large estate ; he would keep open house on certain occasions, such as lawn meets or flower shows (" *cela n'engage à rien*," said Mrs. Toms, approvingly), and would, before many years were over, be asked by an influential deputation to stand for the county. Nay, more. Was it unlikely, or at any rate, was it impossible, that a Liberal Ministry, pleased to have on its side the rare combination of qualities he possessed as a wealthy man, an all-round sportsman, a popular country gentleman, and a devoted adherent, might not even raise him to the—

PEERAGE ?

Such were the thoughts which inflated Mr. Toms' little bosom as he walked slowly up Bond Street. His small eyes were no longer suffused with the tears he had shed so lavishly at Branscombe Hall, nor were his round features harrowed by the deep grief he had then displayed. Though his sorrow was not much more than a week old, he had got over it wonderfully. Why should he not ? Here, in town, where he was most unlikely to meet a member of the Branscombe family to remind him of his affliction, there was surely no reason to mourn more deeply than fashion required. His hatband was of the depth considered proper for an uncle, and as Sir Henry had only been a cousin by marriage, that was really far more than the occasion demanded. His frock coat was black, and he wore an onyx pin

in his handsome black satin scarf. His gloves, too, were black, and his trousers very nearly so. His handkerchief had a black border, and his crest—for Mr. Toms sported a crest—was embroidered on it in black. All this was truly decorous and proper; he was paying his departed benefactor far more respect than any ordinary cousin by marriage would have considered necessary. As to any other proof of affection for the late Sir Henry, it would be produced when called for. Mr. Throgmorton Toms would easily again be moved to tears if the occasion required them. But he was now on no errand of sorrow. He was going to Oxford Street, to see about ordering a drag. He wished to open the season with becoming splendour, and in four months more, the season would be upon him. There was not too much time left, for Mr. Toms had no notion of buying a drag; he intended to have one built specially for him, and he had no misgivings as to his driving. He would take a few lessons, and would soon pick up any minor knack required. Nothing, in the ex-financier's opinion, raised a man so quickly and so decidedly above the common herd, as driving a coach. There could be no doubt at all about it. Taste and money were wanted to start it; a number of servants were required to keep it up. A mere man of straw could not buy it, and a mere City man could not drive it. It brought a fellow into notice at once. Even duchesses would ask whose that beautiful turn out was, while young ladies of title would compete for the box-seat. The drag would fill Mrs. Toms' drawing-room with the people she wanted. The drag would open to Mr. Toms the doors of exclusive clubs; the drag would make both of them sought after and invited; the drag would introduce them to those higher spheres after which they both panted; the drag, in short, was *le moyen de parvenir*. Nor should it be an ordinary drag; the very latest improvements, the most stylish construction, the most tasteful colours, should contribute to make this coach a very triumphal chariot.

So the conference in Oxford Street was long and intimate. Mr. Throgmorton Toms wanted drawings, and a specification, and

an estimate, and though he placed no limit on the money he was prepared to spend, he determined to obtain full value for it. He spoke of splinter-bars, and axle-boxes, and leathers, and tires, and bosses, as if he had never done anything else all his life, but yet Mr. Toms did not deceive himself. He was far too shrewd for that. He thought he had deceived the coachmaker for the present, but he wondered how long he could keep the game up. The little financier was not a modest man, but he knew his own failings. He was aware that driving four-in-hand was a difficult art of which he had not yet mastered the first rudiments, and he knew that if the late Sir Henry had ever put him on anything more lively than Plum Pudding, the fat cob, he would have fallen off. Yet no later than next May he intended to drive his own coach, and in November he would appear at covert side near his own ancestral halls (when he should have bought them) as a thorough-going sportsman. He wished it himself, and Mrs. Throgmorton Toms also wished it. There was no reason why it should not be done. Mr. Toms had not spent more than a year in mastering the secrets of the Stock Exchange, and in two years he was acknowledged to be an able man of business. Why should he spend more than a few months learning driving and riding? For a person of his abilities it would be mere child's play.

So Mr. Toms cast about for some one to teach him to become a good all-round sportsman. No mere riding-master would serve his turn. For in the first place, he had seen so many of the riding-master's favourite pupils come to grief, and in the second, he felt that his having taken lessons might some day come out when it was least pleasant, and his pretensions to being a sportsman might be suddenly knocked on the head. Ah! if Ralph had not been such a fool, Ralph would have been the very man. Ralph would have helped him to learn riding and driving, and he would have put the lad up to a good thing or two in the City, so as to make that two thousand a-year go as far as ten. But Ralph was a bad-tempered idiot. They might have hunted together, and he would not have been particular if Ralph did

knock up a horse or two ; and they might have driven down to the Orleans, and to Ascot, with a fine woman like Diana on the drag, which would have looked well. They might, too, have driven other ladies down to Richmond occasionally—ladies whom Mrs. Toms would call “creatures”—and have had a rare old time altogether. But Ralph was an ill-conditioned cub.

No man, however, in Mr. Toms’ happy pecuniary position need be on the look-out long for someone to show him the “ropes” of sport. In Mr. Toms’ Club—the Colonnade, which he frequented while waiting to be elected member of the great and exclusive Benedict—there was a Major Hunt. No one knew in what regiment he had served, nor whether he had served her Majesty at all. He understood all about horses, and had given friends some very useful tips for the Autumn handicaps. He had formerly ridden in steeplechases as a gentleman jockey, but had not appeared between the flags for years. He and his friends said this was because he was now too heavy ; his enemies gave other and more unpleasant reasons. But the Major certainly looked as if he walked at least twelve stone, so his own version was very probably the true one. Anyhow, the Major was not a bad character. They did not gamble much at the Colonnade. He was not particularly lucky at the one game they habitually played there—half-a-crown whist. There was, in fact, nothing against him. In his favour were a tall but slight figure, a face which might have been termed handsome by a school-girl : very black moustache, full whiskers, dark eyes, and a winning address of undoubted Irish origin.

He had not much money, but he made no secret of his small means. On the other hand, he did not brag of it, as some men will, who begin every sentence with saying “Of course a poor devil like me cannot do so-and-so.” Much satire has been written on purse-proud men and *nouveau riches*, but the poor man who is always calling one’s attention to his poverty is almost as great a nuisance. Major Hunt was a careful man, who never took a cab if his legs would carry him quickly enough, who never spent a shilling if sixpence would do, and who

was satisfied with little because his means did not allow him more. But no one had ever called him stingy, and on occasion he had even been known to be generous.

Now it so happened that at the very time when Mr. Throgmorton Toms left the coach-builder's in Oxford Street, and walked slowly eastwards in a brown study, Major Hunt was going westwards on the same side of the street to interview his tailor on the subject of "doing up" some cords which had seen a good many seasons, and which even the Major's admirable man-servant, who did the most extraordinary amount of work on the very smallest wages (irregularly paid), could no longer restore. Major Hunt, therefore, met Mr. Toms face to face, and as naturally stopped him. Mr. Toms was in a doubtful, hesitating frame of mind, the Major was bright and pleasant. Toms was looking out for a sporting mentor, and Providence sent one straight into his arms. Before the gallant Major had talked in his usual soft and melodious tones for more than five minutes the financier had decided to ask his advice. The drag afforded a capital opportunity. They returned to the coachmaker's together, and this time there was no mistake about the knowledge which was brought to bear on the subject. It is not surprising that Major Hunt postponed his visit to the tailor's in order to return to the Colonnade Club arm-in-arm with Toms. He thought that possibly he might be able to afford to order a new pair soon. Toms only intended to honour his friend with a sort of half-confidence, and had no notion of placing himself entirely under the Major's guidance. But the latter having hooked a heavy fish, played him with the greatest dexterity and patience. He never hinted that Toms could not drive, but told a couple of funny tales of misfortunes which happened to bad drivers, and then abruptly left the subject to admire a pair of horses waiting at Grosvenor Gallery, then insisted on taking Toms into Mitchell's to look at lovely Lady Colthorpe, whose carriage he had noticed outside. The conversation was continued in the Colonnade Club. Throughout the afternoon, Major Hunt tacitly assumed that Toms was a thorough sportsman—in fact, assumed

that his education in this respect had been completed long ago. But when Toms at last hinted that he did not know much of driving a four-in-hand, Major Hunt expressed no surprise, but remarked that very few fellows could *really* drive well, and that he himself was often committing slight blunders in style or in some other detail, though he had driven every season for the last twenty-six years. The two parted after a sherry-and-bitters, and Toms went home to consult his wife. For he seldom did anything important without first asking Mrs. Toms what she thought about the matter. Mrs. Toms told him to bring the Major to dinner, and when she had taken stock of the gallant officer, advised her husband to secure his services at once by a payment of a hundred guineas. That lady was very anxious that her little spouse should shine, and she liked the idea of his becoming first a country squire and then a county member. But she did not wish him to break his back by upsetting a coach in the attempt, and above all she was anxious that he should not be made ridiculous.

Mr. Toms followed his instructions. The Major was of course much surprised, and said he could not think of taking anything, though he would be glad to oblige his friend Toms; but when he found that the financier rather liked the notion of getting his lessons gratis, and was not particularly anxious to press a cheque on him, the Major hinted that of course his toilet was not quite up to the best form, and the bargain was struck. It was arranged that the Major should at once look out for a comfortable crib in the Midlands, where they could hunt three or four days a-week, and practise driving on off-days. They had still three good months before them, and if they picked out rather a quiet place Mr. Toms could take his lessons in both arts without attracting much notice. It was further arranged that Major Hunt should at once buy a sufficient stud for both of them, and all that Mr. Toms stipulated for was that he wished to see the horses first. Thirdly, the Major was to board, lodge, ride, and drive as Mr. Toms' guest. Lastly, it was agreed that the Major should drop no hint to anyone about "teaching" Mr. Toms

what he of course already knew. When these terms had been amply discussed over the best dinner the Colonnade could afford, Mr. Toms handed his gallant mentor a cheque, and both felt that the treaty would be faithfully kept, for it was in the interest of both to keep it.

"You must get into training a bit, my good friend," said Major Hunt, one morning, as they drove down to Mr. Bedford's stables to look at some horses. "We ought to get a clever quiet cob for you to jog about on at first: one that will jump a stile if necessary, and that won't pull at you. Bedford says that he's got a chestnut that will just suit you."

Mr. Toms agreed, for indeed, though he was anxious for the honour and glory of riding straight across country, he was rather nervous about its dangers, and was not at all unwilling to begin quietly. Mr. Bedford had made all necessary preparations to receive the illustrious financier, of whose arrival he had of course been forewarned by Major Hunt. For, notwithstanding that gallant officer's single-mindedness, he was not above taking a small commission from the dealers to whom he introduced his City friend.

Everything looked neat and workmanlike at Mr. Bedford's hunting-stables. There were no untidy heaps of manure about; there were no tumble-down sheds and broken doors. A neat paved yard, surrounded on three sides by ranges of plain but comfortable stabling, the fourth side being occupied by a pretty cottage, in which was Mr. Bedford's office, and a small dining-room specially devoted to the purpose of screwing unwilling buyers up to the mark, and wetting bargains. In one corner was a gate, which gave access to a large grass field studded with the artificial jumps so well known to purchasers of hunters. There was the five-barred gate, which was hung on pivots in the centre of each post, the bars being barely six inches apart. The whole was no higher than a sheep hurdle, and would give directly it was hit. There was the Irish bank, nearly as broad on the top as the Brighton Esplanade, and as easy to get up as a common doorstep. There was a row of hurdles sloped at an

angle, and filled with furze, through which old customers brushed as easily as if it had been a spider's web. And there was also the celebrated "nine feet of bare water"—a trench about six inches deep, with just enough liquid in it to cover the bottom. Over all these formidable obstacles Mr. Bedford's two and three hundred guinea hunters flew without the slightest mistake.

Major Hunt picked out two—a blood-like black, standing just under sixteen hands, and a strong compact bay on short legs, a couple of inches lower, and said he would try these two himself by-and-by. Of course, on Mr. Bedford's showing, the former was powerful and fast enough to win the "Liverpool," while the latter would carry a house all day, and never make a mistake at the most awkward place. But the Major much impressed Mr. Toms by reserving his judgment, and taking the City man aside every now and then to point out, in a low voice, the faults of the various animals shown. At last came the turn of the chestnut cob. He looked well-bred; his small head, broad forehead, and large bright eyes betokened courage and intelligence; he had sloping shoulders, fine full quarters, and capital legs. When the lad trotted him out, the way he carried himself and threw out his fore-legs at once pleased the Major and fascinated Toms, who had never ridden anything over fifteen hands in his life, and was rather frightened of a big horse. Mr. Bedford himself, though a heavy man, rode the cob over the fences, which were, of course, taken quite easily. Then the Major suggested that he would like just to throw his leg over. The cob squinted backwards a little as the stranger approached him and measured the length of the stirrups, but stood quietly enough, and showed off just as well as when under Mr. Bedford.

"What are you asking for him?" asked the Major, when he brought the chestnut back to the group standing at the gate.

"A hundred and twenty," replied that gentleman, without any hesitation.

The Major looked into the cob's mouth—an operation the

little animal did not seem to like at all. But it was not his business just then to point out to the dealer that the horse was long past "mark of mouth," and that he was asking the full price of a fresh five-year-old.

"Will you try him over the fences, Toms?" asked the Major: "I think he will suit you exactly."

Mr. Throgmorton Toms did not like to show the white feather, and he knew that if he intended to learn to ride he must begin some time or another. So, after some hesitation, he agreed. Major Hunt saw the drops of perspiration bursting out on the poor little man's forehead, so he whispered, as Toms settled himself in the saddle: "Don't try the gate and the hurdle. Trot him round quietly, then canter at the bank, and finish with the water. They are both very easy jumps. Sit well back, and let him go his own pace."

Mr. Toms gave his friend a grateful look, and jogged off. The cob shook his head, now feeling a very different hand on the reins. But he trotted round the inner ring quietly enough, and after a few turns Mr. Toms began to regain confidence. He found that he could pull him up at any moment, and therefore soon had no hesitation in putting him into a canter. Finding his action easy and pleasant, he at last hardened his heart, and rode at the Irish bank. It was easy enough to jump up, but in jumping down again Mr. Toms was thrown forward and lost a stirrup. He struggled to regain his seat and the stirrup, and pulled violently at the curb in his efforts. The cob curved his neck at the unusual strain, gave a buck, rolled his eyes till the whites showed, and then put his head straight out and tore away at full gallop towards the trench. At its brink he stopped dead, as if shot, and Mr. Toms, not having yet regained his seat, and there being nothing in front of him, went quietly to grass over the cob's shoulder. "Thank goodness," thought the pony, "I've got rid of that fool, at all events," and trotted calmly up to the gate, while Mr. Toms picked himself up, and looked round rather dazed.

"No harm done?" asked the Major, running up. "It's all





right, old man," he continued, in a lower tone of voice, "you'll do very well now. You rode him at the bank capitally. Only he's got a light mouth, and you pulled the curb too hard. I've seen many a good man across country shot off by his horse stopping dead," he added, louder. "It's the most uncomfortable thing going."

"You're right, sir," said Mr. Bedford, soothingly. "Very few men can sit a horse when they expect him to jump and he don't. But—" And Mr. Bedford was just going to say that it was not the cob's fault, when he was stopped by a wink from the Major. That gentleman then tried all three horses again, looked them all over, punched their ribs, felt their legs, examined their feet, and made passes over their eyes. Finally the party adjourned to the dining-room, where prices were discussed, and Toms was delighted with the talent for driving a bargain displayed by the Major. He offered sixty for the cob, a hundred for the black, and eighty for the bay, all these figures being exactly half of what Mr. Bedford asked. "We may as well try to get them cheap," whispered he to Toms. "Of course they would be a gift at the money, but it's no use telling your outside figure at first." Then there was more general talk, and the Major drew Mr. Toms aside again. "Shall I offer him three hundred for the lot?" he said, "I think he will take it." Mr. Toms agreed, and the Major solemnly made the bid.

"Quite out of the question, sir," replied Bedford. "Is that your last word?"

"Yes," answered the Major.

"Well, sir," the dealer went on, "I'm sorry I can't sell you the horses at the figure. The black stands me in a hundred and fifty, and as to the bay, I could get that much for him at Tattersall's. He's a wonderful handy horse, well known in the Burton country. Never mind, gentlemen, if we can't deal, we can't. Take another glass of sherry, sir," he added blandly to Toms. "Just another drop, do! Well, gentlemen, here's better luck to you elsewhere. Perhaps I shall be able to suit you some other day."

And this concluded the negotiation for that afternoon. But on the way home Toms had misgivings. The Major had surely been too anxious to save a few pounds, and it might have been better to spring a little. Nor did Hunt's conversation shake this view. The gallant Major more than once expressed his regret at not having been able to close, pointing out the difficulty of obtaining exactly what they wanted in the very middle of the hunting season. Before they reached Belgravia Mr. Toms had made up his mind. He brought the Major in, and wrote a cheque for three hundred and fifty pounds. "Try and get them for that," he said, "and then let us look out for a couple of men at once, and for another horse or two."

The acute reader will probably guess that as soon as Mr. Toms' front door closed on him, the Major rushed to the nearest telegraph office, and that Mr. Bedford received a brownish-yellow envelope half an hour later. Next day the horses were transferred to a livery stable in the Brompton Road, while the Major's pocket-book contained ten new and crisp five pound notes. Another went to join this company after he and Mr. Toms had spent an hour in selecting several handsome "best Kersey" suits of clothing, and an infinite number of rugs, rollers, head stalls, and other necessaries for a decent stud.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

DISAPPEARANCE.



CANNOT be the slightest doubt," said Mr. Inkstone, when Ralph had told his story, "that the late Sir Henry Branscombe was not himself when he signed this last will. We

have here another will, dated two years back, in which his property is left in a very different manner. Of course, the second will is genuine; Pickum and Bones, though they often do things we should certainly disapprove, are not the men to lend themselves to anything that is not perfectly legal as far as form goes."

"Well," interrupted Ralph, "if you have no doubt that my uncle was not in his right mind, let us say so and upset the will."

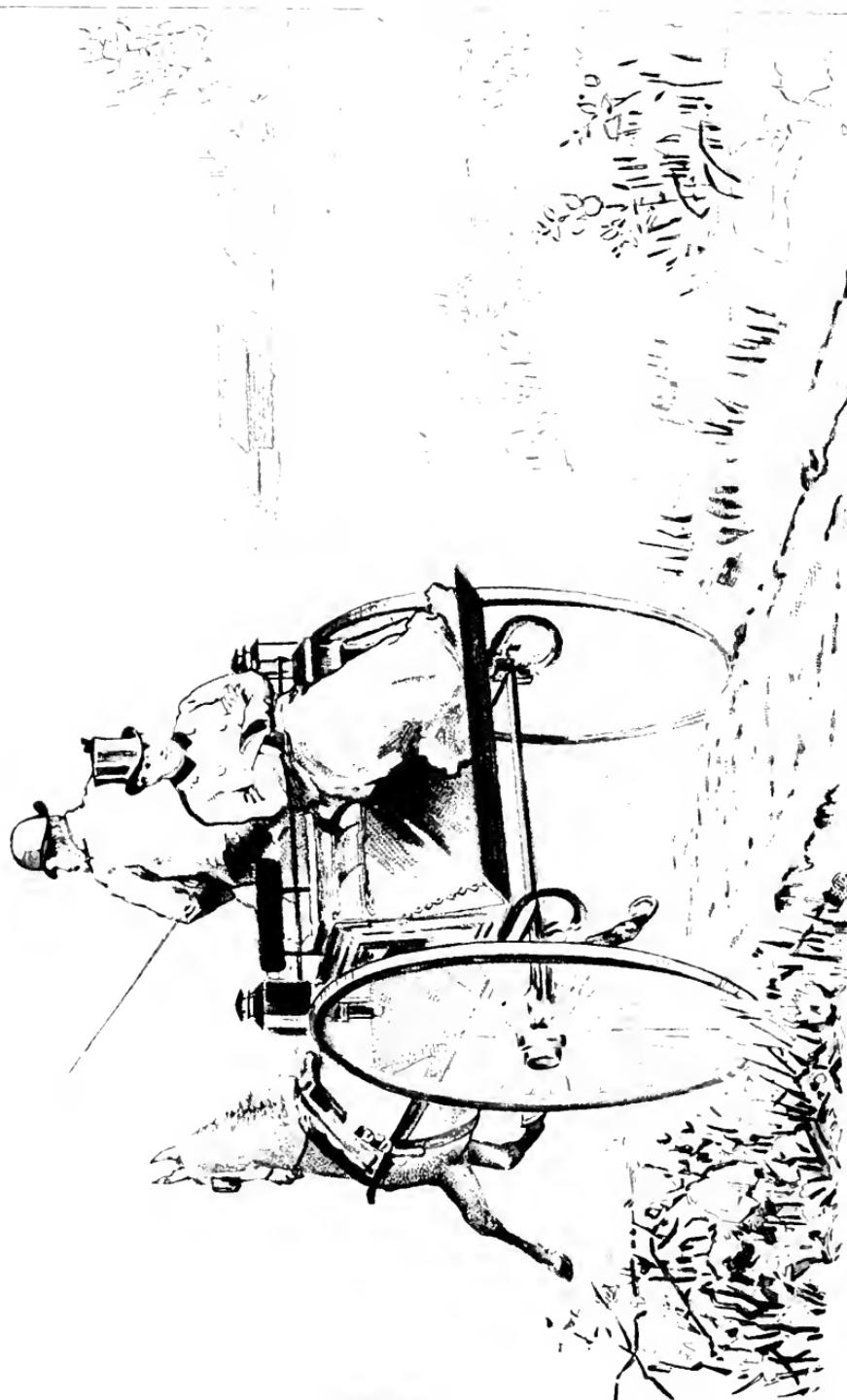
"But, my young friend," replied the solicitor, "though we have no doubt that Sir Henry was mentally unwell, and have also no doubt that he was subject to undue influence from Mr. Toms, *our* convictions are worthless. What we shall have to do is to convince the judge and jury. Now, have we sufficient evidence to do so? I think not."

"We have not sufficient evidence now," answered Ralph, "but we could obtain it."

"It is a difficult matter on which to advise," said Mr. Inkstone, musingly, "but it is probably worth an attempt. We can oppose probate, and meanwhile we can set to work to seek for evidence, a matter, of course, in which you and Mrs. Branscombe must assist. Mrs. Branscombe may possibly help us very materially, for she lived with the testator up to the very day of your marriage. But what do you propose to do while the suit is being carried on? However favourably things may go, it will be a year at least—perhaps much longer—before things are decided."

Ralph was calmer than he had been on the previous days, and willing to take a sensible view of his affairs. After some discussion it was agreed that Brancombe Hall should be advertised to be let, furnished, that the horses should be sold, and that Ralph and his wife should spend a few months at Brighton, or some other convenient place easily accessible from London. It was a severe wrench for him to agree to letting the Hall. To see strangers installed in the home which he had, from his earliest years, been taught to consider sacred to the name of Brancombe, was harder for him to bear than the mere loss of money. Had he been alone, or even with his father, he would probably have been unable to make up his mind to the sacrifice. But Mr. Inkstone was so sensible, and withal so kind, that he reasoned within himself on the folly of his sentimental objections, and finally agreed to the lawyer's view. Knowing his weakness, Mr. Inkstone promised to carry out all the necessary steps, to place the matter in the hands of house agents, and to draw up a proper advertisement. He dismissed Ralph for the day, telling him to call next morning. In the interval he proposed sketching out the evidence which would be required from Ralph and Diana.

Our hero had rather anticipated that he would be kept in London a night at least, and was therefore prepared to spend the afternoon and evening as best he might. His hotel was generally Morley's, but when he went there he found no room, and was obliged to seek quarters elsewhere. Then he proceeded to the



"In pursuit of his Wife."

Club, where he met young Paull and other friends. The time passed more pleasantly than he had expected, his thoughts were diverted from domestic troubles, and when he called on Mr. Inkstone next morning he was in far better spirits, and looked forward to the result of the trial with much hope. A very long conference, at which an astute barrister was also present, was satisfactory, and among other conclusions arrived at was the necessity of at once finding out Mrs. Gore. Ralph did not know her address, but promised to obtain it from his wife immediately. The short winter's day was already declining when he drove to the station on his homeward way. There was no carriage waiting at Warboro', though he had asked Diana by telegraph to send the dog-cart. Rather annoyed and puzzled at this unusual omission, he got into the old creaking fly, and telling the driver to look out for the trap in case he might meet it, he started for the Hall. It was quite dark long before he arrived, and there was nothing unusual in the appearance of the house. The first thing he noticed on entering was a telegram lying on the table. It was addressed to his wife.

"Where is your mistress?" he said to old Pringle, the butler.

"I don't know, sir," answered Pringle, and then looking at him sharply, Ralph saw that he was pale and agitated.

"You don't know? I suppose she is upstairs?"

"No, sir; the mistress drove to Warboro' yesterday, and the brougham came home without her. She gave orders, I believe, that Wenham was to drive back; she said she'd go to Sir George's at the Rectory. We thought that you'd have gone there, sir, to meet the mistress."

Mrs. Armit was summoned, but could give no further explanation. The telegram was, of course, his own, giving directions about the dog-cart. Ralph at once ordered the latter round, and started again for the town. It was the second time he had gone to Warboro' in pursuit of his wife. He hoped that the servant's plausible explanation of her absence was the true one, but he felt a sickening doubt at his heart. Diana was not so

much attached to his mother as to have rushed off to the Rectory in such a hurry, and besides, Miss Nettlerash was stopping there, as she well knew. He hustled the horse—a well-bred bay, one of those which had been bought by Boulter for Sir Henry's riding, but had turned out better for harness than for hunting—and in less than fifty minutes pulled up at the gate of the Rectory, which was closed, showing that no one was expected.

“What a horrible thing to have to do!” thought Ralph, as the man opened the gate. “To go into my father's house and ask whether my wife is there. Supposing she is not! What a beast I was to speak to her like that the other night!”

When the little parlour-maid opened the door Ralph said :

“Is my father in? Then ask him quietly to come into the study. I will wait for him there.”

For he knew that Miss Nettlerash and the whole party would, at this time, be enjoying high tea in the dining-room. But sharp as the little parlour-maid was, Miss Janet's ears were sharper.

“Ralph come back?” she exclaimed, when the girl had stooped down to deliver her message to the Rector in as low a voice as possible. “Ralph come? Well, I think he might give himself the trouble to say how-d'ye-do to his mother and aunt instead of disturbing his father at his tea. I suppose Ralph is too grand for tea. He is driving back to the Hall for eight o'clock dinner, I expect. Ridiculous habit! They dine at eight, and eat a lot of unwholesome French dishes, and then they poison themselves with tobacco, and go to bed with overloaded stomachs!”

During this tirade, Sir George was moving uneasily on his chair.

“Ralph has only looked in for a moment on business, I suppose,” he remarked, attempting to appear unconcerned. “I daresay he just wants to leave a message and to get home. Go on with your tea, dear,” he said to his wife, rising, “I shall not be long.”

“Where is Diana?” was Ralph's greeting, as his father entered the study.

"Diana? How should I know?" asked the astonished Rector.

"Has she not been here, father?" asked Ralph with a sinking heart.

"Certainly not, my boy," was the reply. "I have not seen her since I left the Hall the day before yesterday. Your mother would have mentioned it if she had called to-day. I am sure she has not been near the house. What is the matter?" he added, seeing a ghastly pallor overspread Ralph's face.

For some time the young man did not reply. He sank into a chair, and covered his eyes with his hand. Sir George was seriously alarmed. "Shall I call your mother and enquire?" he asked.

"No, father," said Ralph, "it is of no use. She has run away. Oh, my God! I have driven her away. It is my fault this time! I have been a beast and a ruffian."

"Why, what have you done, Ralph?" exclaimed the Rector, almost doubting his son's sanity. "Tell me—what is it?"

Clergymen have much practice in the parts of father confessors. The Rector had had the troubles of many a wild young man, many an unhappy husband, and many a miserable wife, poured into his ear; and though not gifted with transcendent abilities, his good heart and his sympathy endowed him with the power to soothe and to console, powers which are denied to him who, however clever, thinks only of himself and his own troubles. But the Rector had never exercised his patience and his Christian sympathy with so sore a heart as to-day, when, after much gentle fatherly persuasion, Ralph poured out his story.

He began from the beginning, from his first meeting with Colonel Mannerling, and before he had said much, the Rector grasped his hand, and placed the other on his shoulder, to give him courage to proceed.

The sad tale was once interrupted by Lina, who burst in saying, "Aunt Janet and mamma say, everything is getting cold." But seeing Ralph's pale face she started back, and was dismissed with so much firmness by her father, that she returned almost awe-struck to the dining-room.

"Papa and Ralph have *very* important business to discuss," she reported, "and they are not to be disturbed on any account whatever."

Miss Nettlerash sniffed, and ventured to remark that in old-fashioned times, when a father and son had important business, the mother had a right to be present. But this sarcasm did not stimulate Lady Branscombe to invade her husband's sanctum. She knew what the contents of the will were, and supposed that the conversation concerned them.

In the study, meanwhile, Ralph was slowly and with many hesitations unburdening himself of all his domestic trouble. When he had done, and when Sir George had asked a few questions as gently as he could, both sat for some time in silence.

"You think she has gone away to join him?" asked the Rector at last.

"Yes," replied Ralph, with a stifled sob. "And she has had thirty-six hours' start this time. It is a hopeless case."

"No, Ralph," answered his father, "I think you are wrong. I know something of human nature, and I fancy I know Diana pretty well. She has not gone to Colonel Mannerling. She has simply gone away from you, because she thinks you hate and despise her."



CHAPTER XXXVII.

MISS NETTLERASH GOES IN ANGER.



INCE the opening of the will, Lady Branscombe had not had what the Americans term "a good time" with her sister. Sir George had not confided its contents to his wife until the morning of Ralph's visit,

and even then he advised her not to talk about the matter more than she could help, as future proceedings might be imperilled by gossip. Miss Nettlerash was never so nearly beaten. Direct questions, indirect hints, remarks to the girls, but intended for their mother's ears, were for a long time tried in vain by the persevering lady. On that very afternoon Miss Janet paid a round of visits in Warboro', and devoted much time and attention to Mrs. Quayle, who, she thought, was sure to know all about it, as she was the wife of Sir Henry's doctor. Mrs. Quayle was willing enough to gratify her visitor, and from her Miss Nettlerash ascertained that there had been a free fight between Mr. Throgmorton Toms and Ralph, the former having successfully intrigued to oust Ralph from his just inheritance, and having behaved shamefully altogether. Mrs. Quayle was, of course, a Branscombite, and though by no means a

professional gossip, was not ill-satisfied that so important a person as the new Lady Branscombe's sister should come to her for information. Provided with the most distorted and exaggerated account of Ralph's grievances, and knowing that her nephew was practically disinherited, she appeared at tea with pursed-up lips and a severe frown, which were meant to convey to her unconscious sister and brother-in-law that she had obtained elsewhere that information which they had so unjustly and rudely withheld. Ralph arrived at the Rectory before she had exploded, for though indiscreet enough, she was not so foolish as to pour out the vials of her wrath before the servants. While he and his father were closeted for two hours in the study she could no longer conceal herself, and gave her sister what she termed her frank opinion.

"Mabel!" she exclaimed, "I did not want to talk before the children, but this is really too bad!"

"What is too bad?" asked Lady Branscombe, languidly.

"This dreadful will, and all these mysterious goings on!" replied Miss Janet. "You have all of you conspired to keep from your own sister information she has a right to possess. Then Ralph comes in in the dead of the night——"

"It was only six o'clock," urged Selina.

"Hold your tongue, girl!" exclaimed Miss Nettlerash. "I was speaking to your mother. It is no business of yours. She is treating me in a manner which no sister——"

"Janet!" cried Lady Branscombe, "do moderate yourself."

"Moderate myself, indeed!" repeated Miss Janet. "Do you mean that I have lost my temper? I have *not* done so. If your conduct has been exposed before your children, it is your own fault. But I shall say no more about all these mysterious comings and goings, and about George having to leave his tea before he had fairly begun, and being shut up with Ralph half the night! The chops were greasy enough when they were sent in, and what they must be now, I shudder to think! If I had a husband like yours, Mabel, who goes away from meals in that absurd manner, I would at least have a hot-water dish!"

"It would be a good plan, perhaps," assented Lady Branscombe, hoping that her sister's attack was now directed at another and less important object.

Miss Nettlerash was silent for a few minutes, and devoted herself to mending the traditional pair of black gloves. Then she suddenly remarked, in a tone which was intended to convey concentrated sarcasm—

"I hear that you and Ralph have not got sixpence."

She was horribly disappointed to find that this observation, which was intended to have been a thunderbolt, fell perfectly harmless. Lady Branscombe quickly looked up and placed her finger to her lips. She was a woman of the world, and her children were fairly well trained to obey her signals. Not a word escaped their lips, though Regina had only just time to choke back an "Oh, Aunt Janet!"

Miss Nettlerash glared round the room.

"You seem to take it very easily, Mabel, to see your only son disinherited!" she at last said. "I call it an infamous shame! You are a most extraordinary mother! Some would call you an unnatural one!" she added, with a renewed attempt at sarcasm.

"What would be the use of my jumping about and screaming?" asked Lady Branscombe. "Besides, I am not sure that I have any reason for being put out at present."

Further discussion was stopped by Sir George, who came to tell his wife that he was going back to the Hall with Ralph, and would probably stop there for a day or two. Miss Nettlerash was more put out than ever. Husband and wife left the room without taking the slightest notice of her, and neither they nor Ralph reappeared.

"It is shameful!" she exclaimed. "They are hiding things from me, and take no more notice of me than if I were a chair or a table. I shall go home to-morrow."

In this wise resolution she was strengthened by the events of next morning. Lady Branscombe did not appear at breakfast at all, and when her sister kindly volunteered to go up to her room, sent word that she did not feel equal to receiving any one. The

bread was, in Miss Nettlerash's opinion, ill-made and worse baked. When she suggested that the baker should be changed, Mary was impertinent, and Selina sniggered. The girls were noisy, and took far too much sugar in their tea. When their aunt said so, they laughed, and helped themselves to more. So ill-conducted a household, which the father left on mysterious errands, while the mother was locked up in her room, and neither of them minded at the eldest son being cut off with a shilling, was no place for Miss Nettlerash. She had a good conscience. *She* had not neglected her duty in the past, and she would not do so in the future. She had spoken frankly to her sister, and had pointed out that her children were not taught proper manners, that her servants were careless and disrespectful, her tradesmen a pack of swindlers, and that she and her family must ultimately come to a bad end. These frank sisterly warnings had been received with scorn, the sisterly help offered had been rejected with contumely. Nay, more, she was treated like an intrusive stranger, and information she had a right to was studiously kept from her. It would be useless to remain longer. She could not find out that they were doing anything for Ralph, and there was no sympathetic soul in whom she could confide. In fact, it began to dawn on Miss Nettlerash that she was being calmly "sent to Coventry," as school-boys term it. She was not the person to put up with studied insult. She had suffered much in the cause of abstention from tobacco and alcohol, and more in her attempts to make her sister bring her children up properly and keep house as she ought. She had suffered from rudeness, from neglect, from ill-nature, and she was prepared to suffer more, unto the bitter end. But she felt that a line must be drawn somewhere. When her own lawful sister (as she was fond of terming Lady Branseombe, as if doubts had been cast on the validity of the marriage ceremony between the late Mr. and Mrs. Nettlerash) refused to see her, and the girls bolted in different directions like rabbits before breakfast was over, when her brother-in-law neglected the duties of his parish and hospitality, and she was left alone in the cheerless drawing-

room, where a fire was not generally lighted till the afternoon, she felt that she must put her foot down. It could no longer be borne. She must go. But what worried her most about going was, that there was no chance of seeing Ralph, nor of giving any one a bit of her mind before her departure. She sent Lady Branscombe a message to inform her of her intentions, and the answer merely was that "there was a very convenient train at 12·40, and Susan would order a fly." The servants were most active in assisting her to pack. Miss Nettlerash was never shabby in her gifts, but she must have been a veritable Paetolus to make them put up with her nagging.

So at lunch-time there was general rejoicing, and Lady Branscombe re-appeared. For Miss Nettlerash had gone without an opportunity of "speaking frankly" once more, and the whole family were devoutly thankful.

The Hall had, meanwhile, been the scene of the most careful investigation, which resulted in two discoveries. Diana had taken her diamonds with her, and had left in the empty case a tiny note addressed to Ralph. Its contents were merely: "These are the only things I am taking; they were my mother's. Do not fear. I shall not disgrace you again."

The notion of suicide, which had disturbed Ralph's rest, was thus excluded. Sir George pointed out that people who are going to kill themselves do not take precious stones with them. Their value was probably nearly a thousand pounds, and Diana had evidently gone about her work in a business-like manner. She had removed the diamonds from their cases so as not to have any bulky parcel about her. Everything else in her room was in its usual place. Enquiries made of the servants proved that she had been driven to the Warboro' draper's, and had sent the carriage home, saying she would go to the Rectory.

The same day Ralph and his father went up to consult Mr. Inkstone. Both of them felt that it would be useless to attempt to conceal the circumstances of Diana's flight, which must become notorious sooner or later; but, as a great statesman once said

about war, they preferred that it should be later. And they were unwilling to make enquiries at Warboro' which they felt themselves quite unfit to follow up.

Soon Mr. Inkstone appeared at the Hall with an elegantly dressed companion, a person whom most people would have put down as a gentleman of means travelling for his own pleasure. They would have been wrong. Mr. Inkstone's friend was Mr. Paulovitch, the professional "Private Enquirer." The old-fashioned lawyer had at first suggested Scotland-Yard; but the idea was most distasteful to his clients. Strangely enough, they did not much believe in the new Department, and Ralph strongly objected to the notion of his wife's doings being canvassed even in the private room of the great Criminal Investigator.

His self-reproaches during these days were keen and unceasing. His father was not able to remove their sting without blaming Diana, and any reflection on Diana made Ralph furious. Until now, he had never known how great was his love for his beautiful wife. Night after night he would wearily seek for rest without finding it; he would mourn over the irrevocable past, and would fancy that he would accept any terms, however hard, so long as she were back under his roof. Occasionally he would start up, unable to bear the burden of his bitter thoughts any longer, and would march up and down the room with curses on Colonel Mannerling, on his own fate, and on his cruelty. For neither his father's nor Mr. Inkstone's opinion, nor Diana's own note, sufficed to remove his great fear—that she had gone to join the Colonel.

Mr. Paulovitch industriously pursued his enquiries. Mrs. Branscombe had left Warboro' by an afternoon train, having taken a ticket to a junction down the line. Then all trace of her was lost. The junction was a very lively place, and none of the officials remembered to have seen a lady answering to the description. Enquiries at the London termini were equally fruitless, and though all jewellers and pawnbrokers were warned to detain any person wishing to dispose of certain diamond

brooches and necklets, or of loose diamonds, these steps only resulted in a notorious burglar being handed over to the police, and in two quite innocent persons being carefully followed up by Mr. Paulovitch and his acolytes. Of course, the affair gradually oozed out. In Ralph's presence the pleasant fiction was kept up that Mrs. Branscombe was abroad for the benefit of her health, but as the servants at the Hall knew of her flight, not a soul within ten miles believed this tale. The rumour reached Silverstone, and Miss Nettlerash came over to investigate. She did not go to the Rectory, but she inquired of Mrs. Quayle, Mrs. Forder, and the tradesmen, and enjoyed the grim satisfaction of seeing her worst forebodings verified.

In less than a fortnight Ralph knew that everyone knew all about it, and his house became daily more intolerable to him. A letter from his aunt, in which that lady did not allude otherwise to what was now of public notoriety, but merely invited him to stay at Silverstone as long as he liked, and offered her assistance "in his troubles," was answered politely enough, but of course in the negative. Mr. Snuffbox called, and the first remark he made was, that he had not seen Ralph out with the hounds.

"Of course not," said Ralph. "Why, my poor uncle has scarcely been dead a month."

"I beg your pardon," answered Snuffbox. "Of course. A good man the Bart. We shall miss him terribly. Five 'undred he used to give to the Bankshire 'ounds. I suppose you'll support them, sir?"

"I hope so," replied Ralph. "But I shall not be able to give as much as my uncle."

"Of course not, of course not," assented Mr. Snuffbox. "I've 'eard that the Bart has not left you as well off as he should. We all think that the Bart ain't behaved quite right, and we are very sorry, I'm sure."

"You're very kind," said Ralph, feeling as if he would kick the little man if he said another word. But Mr. Snuffbox went on—

"We are indeed, sir, very sorry for you in all your misfortunes." And he grasped Ralph's hand. "It's a terrible thing. Don't be downcast over it. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"What do you mean?" asked Ralph, smiling sadly. "I'm afraid I can't get another uncle."

"No, sir, no," assented Snuffbox, cheerily. "I'm afraid you won't find another like Sir 'Enry. But the ladies, sir, the ladies. There's a many a one would be glad to marry you, sir, tho' you ain't quite as rich as was expected, and though Mrs. Branscombe as was preferred the soldier ossifer. A fine man too, I believe."

This was too much for Ralph. He did not care to enquire what version of the story had reached Snuffbox, but rising, said, "You must excuse me, Mr. Snuffbox, I'm very busy. Good morning," and strode out of the room. The butler appeared with sherry and cigars, and soon Snuffbox departed, thinking as he rode down the avenue on his old chestnut, that grief must have upset the young Squire's head.

Mr. Snuffbox was, however, not the only visitor. Ralph's old friend, Egerton Paull, of whom he had seen little since his marriage, came directly after Sir Henry's funeral to express his sympathy. When Paull called again, a week later, the news of Diana's flight was all over the place. Ralph was as cold and reserved with him as with every one except his father. The latter, however, met young Paull leaving the Hall, and begged him to repeat his visit, for his friend's sake. The county member's son was one of those kind, healthy, straight-forward young Englishmen, whose pure lives have never been sullied with an evil thought, still less with an evil deed. His father's position and his happy home preserved him from many temptations, and his life had gone on smoothly and easily. But he was a thoroughly good-hearted fellow, who had learnt sympathy with others' griefs, though he had but few of his own, and whose very eyes and voice claimed confidence. It was not long before Ralph began to thaw a little when Paull came over to smoke a

pipe with him, and one day, when the young man told of the one sorrow he had in his life, the loss of a dearly-beloved sister, the reserve at last broke down, and Ralph talked of his troubles, and told his misfortunes. It was the day that Mr. Paulovitch had reported how fruitless his efforts had been.

"It is of no use looking for her anywhere else," said Ralph, bitterly, to his friend. "I know where she is."

"Where?" asked Egerton.

"With that man, of course," replied Ralph. "I knew it all along. The regiment is at Windsor, but he has now left it. He is on staff employ somewhere in the West of England. Old Inkstone and my father are as obstinate as they can be. If it had not been for them, and that confounded fool Paulovitch, I should have found them long ago."

Ralph was pacing up and down the room like a wild beast in a cage. His brows were knit fiercely, and his teeth closely set.

"This horrible inaction!" he went on after a pause. "It is that which I cannot bear any longer. But for my father's persuasion I should not have remained here doing nothing, while he, that beast, that villain——."

Here Ralph broke down utterly, and only a few inarticulate gasps and his clenched fist betokened what violent feelings were agitating him.

"What shall you do?" asked Egerton.

"I am going to find him," replied Ralph, still pacing the room with short, rapid strides. "I shall start to-morrow morning."

"Surely not alone!" exclaimed his friend, alarmed at Ralph's looks. For he was thin and worn, and his eyes glistened brightly as he spoke, with a light in them that no one had ever seen before.

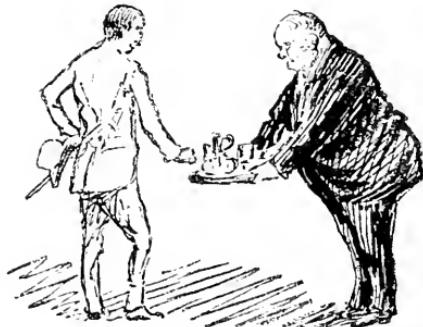
"Not alone? Why not? Besides, who would come with me?"

"I will," answered Egerton, simply.

"You? To be an accessory before the fact? For I am going

to kill him," said Ralph, stopping before his friend, and grasping his shoulders. "I shall kill him, do you understand me?" He gripped Egerton's shoulders with a strength that would have made a weaker man wince, while he gazed at him as furiously as if it had been the Colonel who stood there.

"Never mind, old man," said Egerton, calmly. "I'll come with you and see you through it. When do we start, and where do we go first? Let's get Bradshaw."



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A PAINFUL REVELATION.



NETTLE RASH much desired to intervene actively on behalf of her nephew, to punish his faithless wife, and to restore to him his lost inheritance. She called on Penner & Inkstone, whom she had known for years as the Branscombe family lawyers.

Mr. Inkstone received her very politely, and thought that he was not going beyond the rules of professional discretion in hinting that Sir Henry's will would probably be attacked. But Miss Nettlerash was not satisfied with the solicitor's cautious answer. She settled herself in his room, and gave him what she called "a good talking to," stating the reasons why she was convinced that the late Baronet had not been in his right mind, and recapitulating at great length, and with an infinite number of digressions, all she knew of Ralph's life before and after his marriage. Mr. Inkstone was at first quite inattentive, and only anxious to get rid of his visitor as quickly as possible; yet, as she talked on, he found out that she knew a great deal, and that the violence of her antipathy to Mrs. Throgmorton Toms, and her inveterate habit of worming out all

about everything, might, if judiciously handled, turn out useful in the prosecution of the case. In the mass of rubbish Miss Nettlerash poured out there were a few grains of wheat, and these the lawyer carefully noted. He dismissed her at last with civil thanks for the trouble she had taken. She sniffed and snorted out, "Who should take trouble for the poor boy, now that his mother does not care for his future, if not his own lawful aunt?" Mr. Inkstone assured her that he would "communicate with her" as soon as there was the slightest occasion to do so, and shut the door after her with a sigh of relief.

But Miss Nettlerash's mind was very soon diverted from her nephew's troubles to others nearer home. At Silverstone she found a telegram from Mr. Dawson, informing her that his wife was lying seriously ill at Cheltenham, where she had been delivering a series of lectures on their usual subjects. Miss Janet was nothing if she was not *mobile*. In an hour she and Marian were in the train, and on this occasion her luggage was reduced to exceptionally modest proportions. An old-fashioned carpet-bag showing a huge bunch of faded roses on a green ground on one side, and a brown and white spaniel on a red ground on the other, was all that time allowed her to pack, although she left elaborate directions with Miss Smith to send her other "things" after her when necessary.

Poor Mrs. Mudbury Dawson was already given up by the doctors when her patroness arrived. She had been lecturing against vaccination in a hot and crowded room, and had, it appeared, caught cold on her walk back to the hotel through melting snow and slush. Miss Nettlerash at once exclaimed: "How foolish of her! How often have I told her to change her stockings, whatever else she neglects!" And she raised her dress and her first woollen petticoat, and produced a dry pair of stockings from her spacious inner pocket even as she spoke. "There!" she cried flourishing the grey hose triumphantly in the face of the medical man who had been making his report to her: "Poor Mrs.

Dawson ! If she had only followed my example this would not have happened."

Miss Nettlerash however did more than flourish her grey stockings in the doctor's face ; she did all that was possible to save her friend's life, though in vain. In three days inflammation of the lungs had cut off the energetic lecturer in the very heyday of success, almost before the plaudits which had greeted her anti-vaccination address had died out. The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson had sunk into absolute nothingness from the very day of his wife's seizure. He wandered about in an aimless way, waiting for orders which never came, anxious to obey instructions which she who had always been his instructress could no longer give. All the necessary arrangements were carried out by Miss Janet, who did not allow her grief, great as it was, to interfere with her economic and business-like views. Miss Smith arrived to help her and to take charge of Marian, who was naturally less affected by the death of her mother than she would have been by that of her protectress. Miss Nettlerash attributed Mr. Mudbury Dawson's utter prostration to his overwhelming affection for his late wife, and pitied him accordingly. After the funeral he moaned and sobbed for hours, while she administered consolation and sal-volatile. He did not seem to like either, and while bitterly lamenting his loss he appeared to have no thought for the future. So finally Miss Nettlerash brought the bereaved husband back with her to Silverstone and installed him in that best spare room which he and his wife had so often occupied.

Of course when they were alone neither wine nor any other intoxicating liquors were allowed in Miss Nettlerash's house. Before she had made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. C. T. Mudbury Dawson Miss Janet had occasionally taken a glass of port ; but their lectures had converted her from temperance to total abstinence. She was not however so benighted as to limit her friends to water, tea, or ginger-beer. She would hold forth on the dangers of alcoholic liquors, but there were always a good bottle of old port and one of dry sherry on the table if she asked

outsiders to lunch or dinner. Mr. Dawson was now allowed a little port, for he informed her that the doctor had ordered him to take it on account of his depressed condition. The Rev. gentleman assured her that it was more horrible to him than a nauseous drug, and no doubt it was owing to his habits of self-control that he sipped his glass with apparent satisfaction. A very few days after their return from Cheltenham Mr. Dawson began to take afternoon walks. At first Miss Nettlerash wished Marian to go with him "for fear the poor man should do himself some harm in his despair." But Mr. Dawson assured her that he would rather go alone and commune with his thoughts; that on these walks the spirit of the dear departed was with him, and that they did both his immortal soul and his perishable body much good. Mr. Dawson used to return from his expeditions with muddy boots but with a comparatively cheerful face. Occasionally he went straight up to his room, and then Miss Nettlerash was anxious till she saw him in the drawing-room before dinner. She was then reassured by the colour of his face, which was less grey and pasty than in the morning, and by the cheerfulness of his talk. His voice would sometimes be choked with emotion, but this was after all no more than natural in a man who had just lost so perfect a helpmate as the late Mrs. Dawson.

One evening Mr. Dawson did not join the ladies after dinner as usual. Miss Nettlerash was surprised, and when the tea was brought in she sent Marian to the dining-room. Mr. Dawson was not in his usual place. The servants reported that he must have gone out, as his hat was missing. His hostess became more and more agitated as the evening wore on and the truant did not appear. She sent Marian to bed at the usual time, at half-past ten; she told the servants not to remain up, as she herself would let Mr. Dawson in. They obeyed, wondering, while Miss Nettlerash could scarcely repress her anxiety, and was unable to sit down to her knitting in her accustomed manner. What could have become of him? Had his despair at last conquered his reason, and had he flung himself into the water in a moment

of madness? Visions of dragging all the neighbouring horse-ponds were before her mind. Should she send for the coachman at once and institute a search? Miss Nettlerash was only able to refrain from this course of action by an instinctive feeling she would scarcely admit to herself. She had noticed, or fancied she had noticed, that all the servants, and more particularly the coachman, treated Mr. Dawson with scant civility, and were unwilling to put themselves out on his account. She felt that it would be an extraordinary thing to send to the stables after eleven o'clock at night and rouse up the men to look for her clerical friend. She was almost afraid of doing it. The coachman might say it was no part of his duty, and refuse to be disturbed. What should she do then? She could not make him go, and she would look such a goose before the rest of the household. So she resolved to wait yet a little longer.

Her patience was rewarded. The drawing-room door was ajar, and just before twelve she heard the noise of some one trying the handle of the house door. She went into the hall and listened, for it might be a burglar. The old lady forgot that burglars do not generally force their way into houses by noisily fumbling at door-handles. The clumsy attempts continued, and then she heard what sounded very much like a bad word. "That is not Mr. Dawson!" thought she. "Who can it be?" At last the late comer rang the bell, and Miss Nettlerash summoned up courage to open the door. The gas had been turned out, so she held one of the tall silver drawing-room candlesticks in one hand, while she nervously pulled back the bolts and bars with the other. She was slower over the chain than quite suited the gentleman outside, for he rapped on the door with his fists, and said "Look sharp, Susan, itsh' only me."

At last the chain hung loose, and the door flew back. It was, indeed, the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson. Though his hat was on one side of his head, though his clerical waistcoat was unbuttoned, and his nose lighted up with a ruddy hue which was not that of health, she recognized him instantly. But he was not so quick at recognizing her. Coming from the outer dark-

ness to the light of the candle, which Miss Nettlerash held close to his face, he still thought that it was Susan.

"You've been devilish slow about door," he said, huskily. "Hope ole woman shleep." Then he lurched forward into the hall, and held out his hat for her to hang it up.

Miss Nettlerash shut and bolted the door, pulled him by the arm, and held the candle close to his swollen eyes, glaring at him.

"What is the matter, Mr. Dawson?" she asked, astonished. "What brings you home so late, and in such an extraordinary condition?"

"Oh!" said the reverend gentleman, "Itsh you, ish it? Never mind, 'sh all right." And with these words he lurched up to the hat pegs, and tried to divest himself of his overcoat, and pull himself straight.

Still Miss Nettlerash could not make it out. "Come into the drawing-room," she said; "there is some tea left, and the kettle is on the hob. What has happened to you?"

He obeyed, knocking over a hall chair and bumping against the wall on his way. By the time he had reached the drawing-room he had managed to button his waistcoat.

"Now what has happened?" asked Miss Nettlerash.

"Noshing, noshing 'tall," answered Mr. Dawson. "Out for walk."

"He is not well," thought Miss Nettlerash. "It is of no use bothering him now. The poor man is a little queer in consequence of his dreadful loss. Have some tea," she said aloud.

Mr. Dawson was just sensible enough to accept the offer. He sat up with preternatural stiffness till the tea was ready, and then pulled his chair up to the table, for he mistrusted his power of holding the cup. Its effect on him was curious, and not at all what Miss Nettlerash expected.

"Itshall right, dear," he said, affectionately, when he had drunk the tea. "Look here. Can't go on like this you know. Itsh too shad, too shad."

Miss Nettlerash stared.

“Too shad!” repeated Mr. Dawson, pulling a dirty bit of paper out of his pocket, under the impression that it was a handkerchief, and elaborately wiping his eyes. “No wife, no noshing. Whatsh the use?”

Miss Nettlerash saw that her supposition was correct. The man was clearly still suffering agonies from his loss.

“Poor Mr. Dawson!” she said, gently laying her hand on his arm. But as she approached him, a queer disagreeable odour met her nostrils—a smell like that of the bar of a public-house. Mr. Dawson seized her hand.

“Poor fellow!” she went on, withdrawing it hastily. “You will get over it in time. She was indeed a great loss. But you must submit to the derees of Providence.”

Mr. Dawson seemed to be much rejoiced at her sympathy. “Whats’l the oddsh?” he asked. “Plenty more. Lotsh women glad to marry Dawson. But no, no! There’sl only one woman I’ll marry,” he exclaimed, laying his hand on his heart.

“You had better go to bed,” suggested Miss Nettlerash, a little alarmed, and finding the public-house smell growing stronger.

“Go to bed?” exclaimed Mr. Dawson in a tone of decision. “No. Won’t go to bed yet. Lets’l have a jolly night of it. Got some port wine? Very good wine that! Look ’ere, old ’oman, when ish it to come off?”

“What?” asked Miss Nettlerash, now seriously frightened.

“What? wedding, to be shure. When will you marry your dear old Mudbury? Nish home, good hubby, all you want. Eh, old ’oman? We know all about it.” And he attempted to look knowing, an attempt which resulted in a horrible leer.

Then a most awful thing happened, a thing so awful that the printer’s ink almost blushes to relate it. The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson staggered up from his chair, and before Miss Nettlerash, who was stricken motionless with amazement, could fly from him,

threw his arm round her waist and impressed a smacking kiss on her virgin lips.

Miss Janet screamed loud enough to waken the dead. Mr. Dawson seemed scarcely disconcerted, and went on, cheerfully. "Soon get married, eh? Jolly wedding, lotsh champagne, no more beashly lectures."

Miss Nettlerash bolted. On the landing stood Susan, with a shawl thrown over her night dress, pale as a ghost, and holding the bedroom candle all crooked.

"Oh Susan, Susan!" exclaimed Miss Nettlerash, "we must send for a doctor. Mr. Dawson is quite mad. He is dreadfully ill!"

"Mad? ill?" said Susan, recovering her composure. "Is that all, mum?"

"Why, what do you mean, Susan?"

"He ain't ill at all, nor mad neither, mum. Look at him," she added, as the two women saw him lurching towards the stairs, muttering to himself. "He is as drunk as a lord, that's all."

"Drunk?" asked Miss Nettlerash, horror struck. "Tipsy?"

"Ay," said Susan, "tipsy. He's been tipsy nearly every afternoon this week, and at night too, if he could get hold of any liquor. Ask Mary, Miss, or the coachman, they'll tell you the same. We've all seen it."

"It must have been the death of his wife!" said Miss Nettlerash.

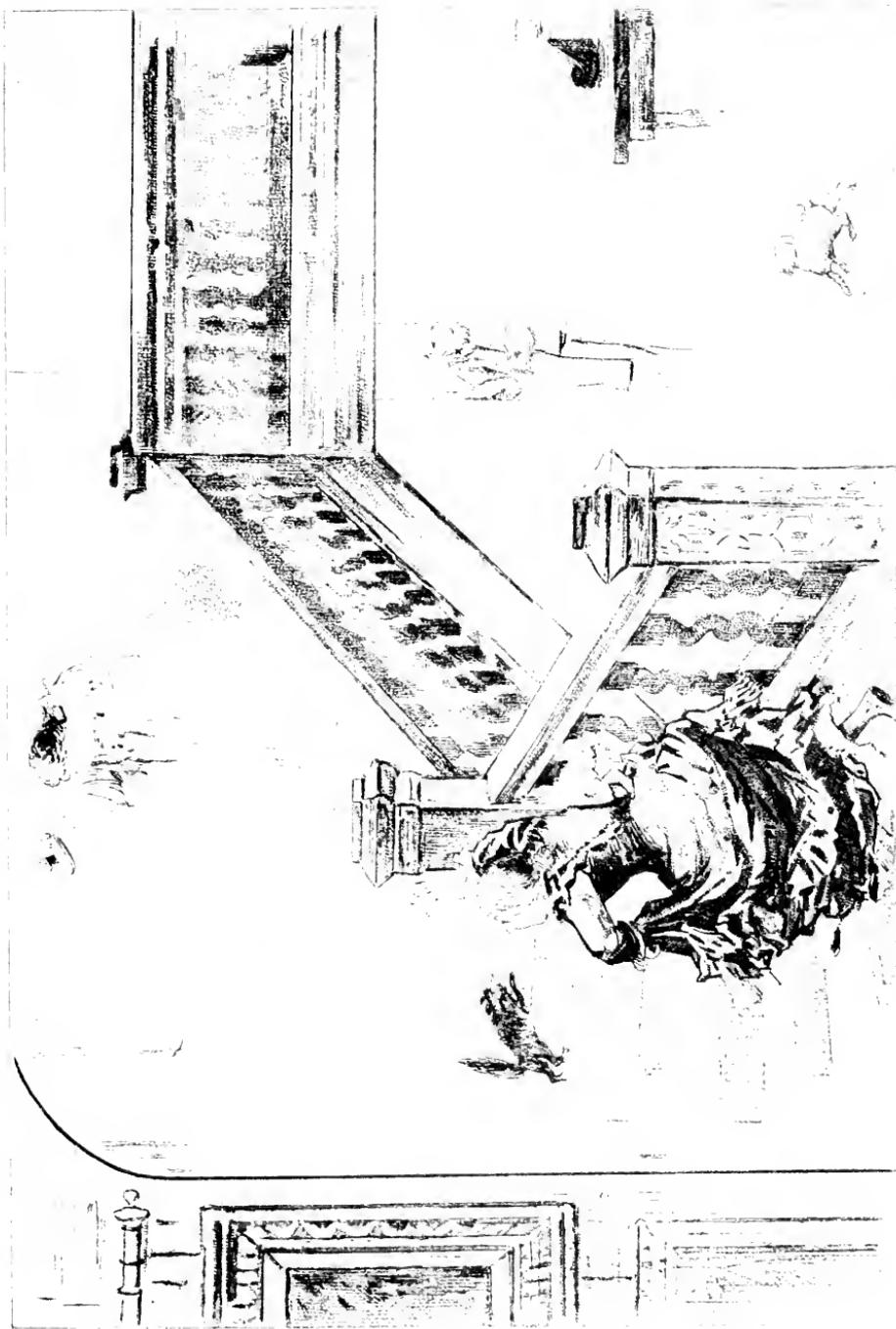
"Well, he has been worse since," admitted Susan. "But he used to get drunk before, when he got a chance. When you was away, Miss, he used to get drunk 'most every night."

"Too horrible!" exclaimed Miss Nettlerash. "It cannot be true."

"Quite true, Miss, I can tell you, on my bible oath."

Meanwhile Mr. Dawson had collapsed on the stairs into a mixed heap of clothes and humanity.

That was enough for the night. And next morning so much evidence of the Rev. lecturer's habits was forthcoming that even



Miss Nettlerash was convinced. Mr. Inkstone was summoned, and Mr. Dawson was expelled from Silverstone, it being agreed that he should receive ten pounds a month so long as he did not annoy Miss Nettlerash nor his daughter.

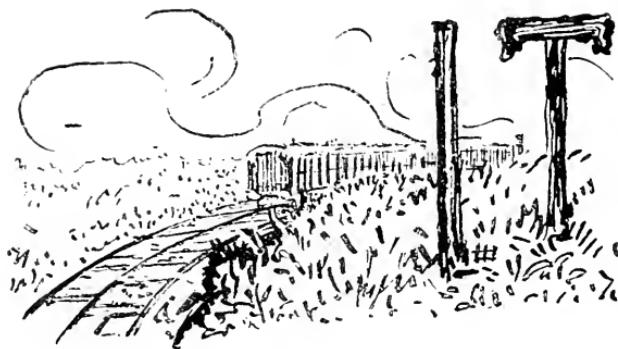
What he looked like when he left the house may be left to the imagination of the reader.

Miss Nettlerash settled a long unpaid score he had run up at the Blue Lion, and one almost as long at each of the other local public-houses.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

PURSUIT.



IS not difficult to discover the whereabouts of an officer in H. M.'s Foot Guards, even if he is for a time in staff employ. Ralph knew that Colonel

Mannering was under the orders of the General commanding at Devonport, and Plymouth therefore was the first destination of the two friends. The injured husband, having once decided on calling the Colonel to account, was burning to carry his plan into immediate execution, and wished to travel by the night mail. But Egerton Paull, though willing to humour him to some extent, positively refused to spend a night in the train even to oblige Ralph.

“No, old man,” he remarked, “I'll see you through it, and hold the Colonel for you if he can't hold himself up when you tackle him. I don't mind being what you call an accessory before the fact, but I'm blessed if I am going to lie awake all night in a nasty, cold railway carriage. Look at the time we reach Plymouth, too! Half-past four in the morning. Absurd! You can't go and knock a man down at that unearthly hour.”

“I'm not going to knock him down,” replied Ralph, sternly, and vexed at his friend's tone, which he considered frivolous. “I'm going to shoot him like a dog.”

Paull did not think it wise to contradict him. “Very well,”

he said, "we will shoot him. But let us do so as much like gentlemen as we can."

"You don't call him a gentleman, do you?" sneered Ralph.

"No; but I am one, and so are you. Seriously, you surely do not want to get behind a man and shoot him as he comes out of his quarters?"

"Not exactly," said Ralph, "though he fully deserves it. No. We must find some other way. I must discover Diana first, and then thrash him to within an inch of his life. Then we will go to Belgium somewhere, and I'll take what's left of it."

"Very well, I do not mind that programme," replied Egerton Paull. "But I won't go by any train except the Flying Dutchman."

Sir George was not quite aware of Ralph's object. The latter of course knew that his father's cloth would suffice for him to oppose violence of any sort by any means in his power, and that in such a case he would even invoke the assistance of the police. And young Paull thought that on the whole Ralph was right to follow the Colonel to the west. It was quite possible that Diana might be with him. For of course Paull had had no opportunity of observing her character, with the changes that had recently come over it. He only knew that she had deceived Ralph once, and had eloped with Colonel Mannerling. He heard that she had apparently repented, and Ralph had given him a narrative of what he termed his own brutality. Therefore it seemed logical to suppose that Diana, having been repulsed by her husband, and seeing no chance of regaining her former status, had gone off for the second time, taking her measures more carefully than before. This view was shared by Lady Branscombe, and even Sir George was gradually being converted to it. As to Ralph, he never had any doubts on the subject at all. To find Colonel Mannerling was to find Diana. To punish the Colonel first and shoot him afterwards was the only object he now had in life. He consented in an absent way to the immediate measures of economy his father proposed, and quite

agreed to let Branscombe Hall for a term of years. He directed the horses to be sent to Tattersall's, making an exception only in favour of Peterboro', his uncle's favourite, and Peabody, his own. These were to go to the Rectory when the Hall was off their hands. The Rector was very anxious as to the result of his son's journey, which Ralph declared to be to London only for the present. But he had great confidence in Egerton Paull, and implored the young man, with tears in his eyes, to take great care of Ralph, and not to let him get into mischief. Paull gave the required promise, though he felt that he could scarcely keep it. For his friend's quarrel seemed to him a just one, and the Divorce Court a poor place to fight it out. Ralph thought that when an English gentleman is wounded in his honour, money damages are a poor consolation, and to drag a wretched woman through the Courts none at all. When he loves that woman, the remedy is worse than the disease. In such cases his instinct prompts him to resort to the weapons of a less civilised age; his fists, a horsewhip, and finally pistols. A mortal quarrel of this sort should be settled with as little publicity as possible, and far more speedily and surely than by the procedure of Courts. If the injured man fall, he has fallen in a just cause, and besides, what remains for him to live for? Why should he fear death? Let the seducer take his life also, having taken that which was dearer to him than life. Then, at any rate, he could marry Diana, for he, Ralph, would be out of the way.

In all these thoughts, implicitly and indirectly conveyed, rather than explicitly stated, Ralph found the fullest sympathy in his friend. There was no half-heartedness about Paull, and an immense pity overwhelmed him for the blighted life of the man who sat next to him in the Plymouth express. There was no way of alleviating the cloud which had fallen on him, except to find Diana; and yet Egerton admitted to himself that to find her with the Colonel, to attain positive certainty of her faithlessness, would plunge Ralph into still deeper despair. Now, at any rate, there was a glimmer of hope. She might be hiding some-

where, and living quietly on the proceeds of her diamonds. It seemed cruel to deprive the husband of that one remaining ray of light, to send him back to brood on the absolute darkness of a homeless, deserted future. Yet other men's wives had run away from them, and they had been happy afterwards, and had applied for a divorce, and had even married again, and had had children, and were quite comfortable, and never thought of the months of agony through which they had passed.

Was Ralph such a man? As Egerton Paull, pretending to sleep, watched the wan face and the open eyes of his friend, staring wakefully at vacaney, he was fain to confess that the blow had hit hard, and that recovery, though just possible, appeared a very remote possibility. The "Flying Dutchman" did not travel fast enough for Ralph's impatience, and neither newspaper nor book diverted him for a single moment. As soon as they reached their destination they drove to head-quarters, and at once ascertained that the Colonel was in charge of a party surveying somewhere between Torquay and Dartmouth. He was stopping, they believed, at Paignton. Paignton is on the branch line, and they had to go back to the junction, and change carriages there, which involved a further delay, under which Ralph fretted terribly. Paull could not persuade him to eat anything, and when they reached Torquay and found that the train went no further, it became impossible to control him. It was also growing dusk, and though cold and exhausted with the long journey, Ralph at once asked for a fly to Paignton. While it was being got ready a porter suggested the steam launch, which, he said, was going to start at once, and would take them across the bay to Paignton in far less time than a carriage would occupy to drive round. Paull observed that it was rough and squally, and that a steam launch was at best a very inconvenient means of transit. But Ralph was in a hurry, and carried his friend off to the stone pier, where, in the gathering dusk, the fire of Puffing Billy could be seen glowing brightly alongside. There was a knot of people on the pier, and the steam launch was crowded with workmen going back to

Paignton, and fishermen returning to Brixham. The tide was running out swiftly, and the boat was moored securely fore and aft to keep her steady. The friends stepped on board, and in a few minutes the skipper cried out, "One turn ahead! Slack out!" and the men payed the rope out through their hands as the boat slowly moved off. "Stand by, forrard! Let go!" shouted the skipper again, and the noose of the forward rope was thrown off a bollard on the pier and splashed into the water. "Half speed ahead! Let go aft!" was the next order. Ralph stood on a seat near the stern, abstractedly watching the process and the group on the pier, whose faces it was impossible to make out in the gloaming. When the screw began to throb, and the stern rope was cast off, there was a cry from that little knot standing near the bollard. A man's leg was caught in the bight of the rope, and when it was let go and swiftly flew off the pier after the steamer, it carried him with it off his feet. For a moment he was seen to hang in mid-air, and then plunged head-foremost into the swirling water. Before it closed over him the little steamer was a hundred yards from the pier. Then the passengers saw a white line of foam, showing where the rope was dragging the unfortunate man along, and there was a shriek of horror. "Save him!" cried one. "He is in the bight of the rope!" called out another. "Get a boat," was the suggestion of a third. But meanwhile the poor fellow was in the black depths, hopelessly entangled in the rope, and though the launch was stopped, she had dragged him a long way, and there was no one ready to help.

"Have you a line?" shouted a clear strong voice. "Look alive, man! Give us hold, there!"

And someone stood up on the gunwale of the launch, threw off his coat, took a turn round his arm with the line handed him, and crying "Stand by the line, and haul in when I tell you," jumped overboard.

For a moment nothing was seen. The water closed over the last man as it had closed over the first. But then a cheer burst from the pale lips of the anxious crowd, as two white sleeves

were seen cleaving the water, and steering for the pier with steady, powerful strokes. Though the swimmer was strong and the distance was short, it seemed an eternity before he had covered only a few yards. Then the white sleeves disappeared again.

“He is sinking!” called out someone. “Haul away at him.”

“No, slack a bit there, my men!” cried the skipper. “He is diving for him. A real good man, too, though he looked almost a gentleman.”

In the excitement even Paull did not notice this cutting remark. All his attention was riveted on the water, where Ralph was struggling gallantly to rescue the drowning man. Paull was holding on to the line with a couple of the sailors; feeling it tauten, he made them pay out more, and after many seconds, which seemed hours, at last a white sleeve again shone out upon the black water, and a faint voice reached them.

The skipper was standing on the counter, looking out.

“Haul in, boys; haul away!” cried he, cheerfully. “He’s got him! Haul away steady on the warp, as well.”

Then they could see that one arm was thrown round the big rope, while the other supported an indistinct and dripping mass. A dozen forms jumped on the gunwale, and twenty brawny arms were stretched out to help as the ropes came slowly on board.

“Easy!” cried Ralph, in a faint voice. “Easy—his leg is still in the rope; take care you don’t hurt him.”

Paull was the first to drag his friend on board, while the men relieved him of his burden.

“It was a close thing!” said he, when he had regained his breath a little. “I thought I should have to go. But I would not go till I had killed that man,” he added, as Paull offered him a pull from his flask. “I believe God sent me that poor fellow to save, just as an atonement before-hand. I was not going to be drowned. I am more likely to be hanged.”

“Don’t talk like that, Ralph,” said Paull. “There are all the fellows listening.”

And indeed the men were crowding round, each anxious to shake hands with the real gentleman, who was a good man nevertheless. But Ralph went on,

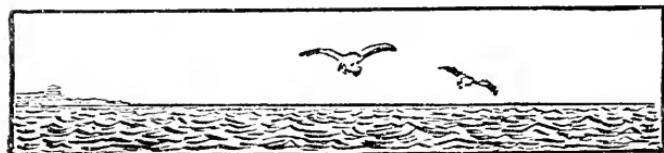
“What about the poor fellow? Paull, see if you can give him some brandy. I believe he is quite insensible.”

Three paces off the captain and some sailors were stooping round the prostrate form of the rescued man. The furnace door was open, and they were trying to revive him by its warmth.

“Hold up his head, Egerton,” said Ralph; “I will try and pour some brandy down. I’ve not drunk it all.”

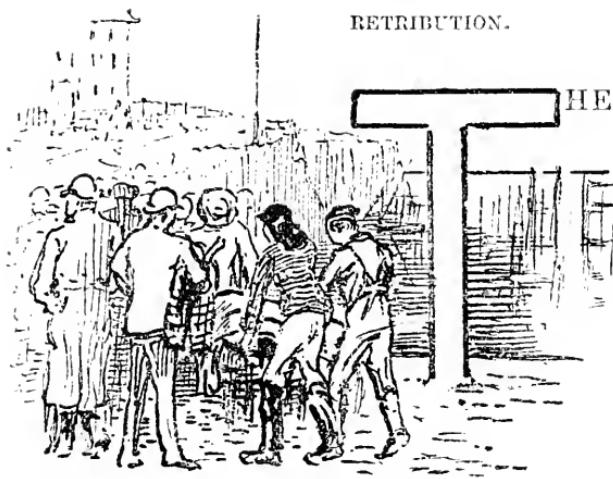
Egerton obeyed. He lifted the man’s head, and the full glare of the fire fell on his face. His eyes were closed, his black moustache hung down limply, and blood was slowly trickling from his nostrils.

“Good God!” cried Ralph, staggering back. “It is Mannering!”



CHAPTER XL.

RETRIBUTION.



HE steam launch was now alongside the pier again. Four volunteers carried the still unconscious Colonel ashore, and Egerton Paull, taking Ralph's arm,

helped him up the gangway, for he was in a sort of trance. There was now no object in going on to Paignton.

"What shall we do with the gentleman?" asked one of the men, as he propped the Colonel up against a post.

"Bring him to the Royal Hotel," exclaimed Ralph, suddenly waking up, "and hand those bags of ours ashore; we sha'n't go to Paignton to-night."

"Who will run for a doctor?" asked Paull. A lad at once offered to fetch one.

Then they carried Colonel Mannerling to the Royal, which is scarcely a quarter of a mile from the pier-head, and the two friends walked behind the hand-barrow on which they had laid him. They did not speak to each other, although it was impossible for them to avoid answering the questions showered on them from all sides. "Who saved him?" "Who is it?" "How did he fall in?" "How was he got out?" These and many more were asked and replied to, more or less

correctly, in the steadily increasing crowd which surrounded the principal personages.

When within a few yards of the Royal, Ralph at last spoke. "Tell them to take care of him, Egerton. We must not lose him again, now I have fished him out of the sea."

Paull obeyed. "It is Colonel Mannering of the Engineers," he said to the landlord, who met the procession at the door. "He has been in the water some time, and we want a warm room for him immediately."

Ralph insisted on standing by while the dripping garments were removed from the still inanimate body, and would not leave the room until the doctor had arrived and taken the case energetically in hand. Even then Paull got him away with difficulty, and only by calling his attention to the fact that he was himself quite as wet as the man he had rescued, and left a pool of water wherever he stood.

"Come and change your clothes, Ralph," said Egerton. "Don't be afraid, the poor fellow can't get away. I don't want you to catch your death of cold yourself."

"Yes, I am cold," said Ralph, shivering. "I did not notice it before. I'll come now." But he could scarcely walk, and required his friend's help to move. In dry clothes and before a roaring fire, however, he soon regained his natural warmth.

"I wonder where she is," he said, after he had sent Paull to enquire about the Colonel, and had received a favourable report. "She'll come as soon as she hears of the accident."

"If she is here at all," suggested Egerton.

"There is not much doubt of *that*," remarked Ralph, with a bitter smile. "Had we not better send word to his lodgings at Paignton? She will come quickly enough when she hears that her lover is half drowned, though she could not bear even the sight of her husband."

"Ralph, Ralph!" exclaimed Egerton. "You do not mean it. What would you say if *I* spoke like that? Think, man, if you have still the use of your brains, and be steady. Do you not see the sign of a higher Power in to-day's event?"

"Pooh!" said Ralph, "as if God Almighty interfered in our petty actions."

"Whether it be the direct intervention of Providence or not, Ralph, surely this is enough to make a fellow pause in his own schemes and reflect on his actions. Remember, you came here to find the Colonel—and to kill him!"

"I was going to give the cur a thundering good horse-whipping first, anyhow," observed Ralph.

"Yes; having insulted and thrashed him first, you wanted to shoot him afterwards. And while you were still in that frame of mind you jumped into the water, and saved his life at the peril of your own."

"I wish I had not," answered Ralph. "I wish to Heaven I had let him drown!"

"You do not, Ralph; you cannot look me calmly in the face and say so. I am not a chapel-goer, and I don't preach religion, but I cannot think over the last two hours without feeling a conviction that Divine Mercy has intervened to prevent your committing a deed you might have repented all your life."

"I should never repent shooting Mannerling," answered Ralph, still unconvinced, but less positive than he had been. "And look here, old man—I feel queer, somehow."

It was no wonder that he felt queer after the emotions of the afternoon, and a quarter of an hour in the cold sea on a January day. He simply fainted, and for the next hour the doctor was almost as busy with him as with the Colonel. But by that time both had revived. Ralph was soon able to eat a little dinner, and Mannerling, though very weak and exhausted, was steadily improving, and had quite regained consciousness. Late in the evening his servant arrived, and as the doctor did not wish the patient to be disturbed, the man was sent into the sitting-room the friends had securéd.

"Are you Colonel Mannerling's servant?" asked Ralph, brusquely, when he was shown in.

"Yes, sir; I've brought the Colonel's things, sir, as I heard of the accident."

"Does Mrs.—I mean, does the lady know? Is she coming?" asked Ralph. His very life seemed to depend on the man's answer. His head was eagerly thrust forward, and his lips were parted as he watched the servant's face. It wore a puzzled look.

"Beg pardon, sir, but who did you say, sir?"

"Well, the lady," said Ralph, impatiently.

"I don't know any lady, sir," answered the man. "There ain't no lady, sir, barrin' Mrs. Brown, the one that lets apartments. The Colonel ain't a married gentleman."

Ralph sank back in his chair. "That will do," said Egerton, to the man. "Go and get some supper. The doctor will call for you as soon as you may go in to your master."

"Well," he went on, as soon as the man had closed the door behind him. "You see, Ralph, that your wife is not with him."

"That man proves nothing," answered Ralph. "Very likely she would not be living with him. Perhaps the blackguard wants to keep things quiet. I shall soon find out all about it."

Egerton Paull had a hard fight to prevent Ralph from speaking to the Colonel that night. He was obliged to appeal to the doctor, and to obtain his explicit orders that the patient should be kept quiet. "You would not go and kill him in his bed after saving him, would you?" he asked. "You jumped into the water like a hero to save a drowning fellow-creature. Don't go and spoil it all now." And when he at last persuaded Ralph to go to bed, and wished him good night, he pressed his hand warmly. "Sleep on it, old man; and remember," he said, solemnly, "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'"

Ralph soon dropped off into a dreamless sleep, the result of absolute exhaustion, but not before he had had time to reflect. For days, aye, for weeks he had dwelt on the scene in which he intended to act the part of avenger. He had spent the hours of the night and those of the day in thinking of the hideous crime the Colonel had committed, and of the terrible punishment he would mete out. The consequences had been to him of no

importance ; the great aim and object of his now lonely life was to smite the evil-doer. “ An eye for an eye ” had been his text. Colonel Mannering had robbed him of his wife, of his happiness, and of his honour, and no penalty would suffice short of disgracing him publicly, and killing him afterwards. In one brief hour everything had changed. He himself, the very man whom the Colonel had most injured, had saved the life he had come to take, and his intended victim was lying helpless in the very next room.

Was it not strange, passing strange, that his arm should be stayed when it was about to smite in a just and righteous cause ? But was the cause just and righteous ?

Over this puzzle he fell asleep, and the bright sun, which shines at Torquay even in January, was streaming full into his room when he awoke, with no worse consequences of his dip in the sea than a painful stiffness in all his limbs. Paull came in while he was dressing, and gave him good news of the Colonel. The doctor said there was now nothing wrong, but that the long immersion and cold had produced excessive weakness. He recommended rest, simple food, and a warm room for two or three days.

“ Then I may see him ? ” asked Ralph, eagerly.

“ After breakfast,” answered Paull.

“ Pooh ! Fancy talking of breakfast,” replied Ralph. “ As if I could eat any breakfast while I want to know where he has hidden Diana.”

“ *I* can, at any rate,” said Paull, smiling, “ and I think he can. In no case are you to see him till eleven o’clock. Such are the doctor’s orders.”

Ralph was obliged to obey, but he certainly did not eat any breakfast. He walked up and down the room impatiently till the clock struck eleven. Then he could no longer be restrained, though Egerton Paull implored him to be calm, fearful as he was of a terrible scene. “ Remember,” he said, before he let Ralph open the sick man’s door, “ he is weak and helpless. You would be ashamed to bully him now, would you not ? ”

And, indeed, Colonel Mannerling, prostrate in the bed, pale and exhausted, was not the victim whom Ralph in his fancies had intended to horsewhip remorselessly. He stopped for a moment, looking at the soldier, who slowly turned his head towards the door, while a faint flush coloured his cheeks.

“Mr. Branscombe,” he murmured, attempting to raise himself, “I hear you saved me.”

“Colonel Mannerling!” exclaimed Ralph, striding up to the bed, “where is my wife?”

The Colonel looked at him in surprise. Ralph repeated the question.

“Your wife?” he at last stammered: “how should I know?” And he appeared genuinely startled at the inquiry.

“Oh, don’t be afraid, Colonel Mannerling,” said Ralph; “I shall not hurt you. I don’t hit a man when he is down. But you know where she is, and you will have to tell me. You ran away with her, you know!”

Again a blush rose to the sick man’s face. “Yes,” he murmured, “I know it well enough. You need not remind me.”

“Well, then, where is she?” exclaimed Ralph, roughly. “What have you done with her?”

“Why you took her back yourself, ever so long ago!” And the Colonel looked at Paull, as if doubting whether Ralph were in his right senses. The young man thought it was time to interfere.

“Colonel Mannerling,” he said, “Mrs. Branscombe left her home secretly, some weeks ago, and has not since been heard of. Rightly or wrongly, Mr. Ralph Branscombe thinks that you know where she is. You owe your life to him, and you are bound to tell him the truth.”

“Left her home? Gone away?” asked Mannerling, amazed.

“Yes; don’t prevaricate!” said Ralph. “Tell me where she is.”

“Be quiet, Ralph, for a moment,” interposed Egerton;

“don’t you see that he knows nothing about it? Give him time to think, at any rate; he is still half drowned.”

The Colonel raised himself on one arm. “I begin to understand,” he said; “you think that she has run away with me again.”

Ralph nodded.

“No,” the Colonel continued, “not again. Upon my honour, I know nothing of this. I have not seen Mrs. Branscombe since that night—you know.”

“Ay,” said Ralph, bitterly, “I remember. But what of your honour? Do you think I am fool enough to take your word of honour?” The sick man’s face flushed.

“Ralph,” exclaimed Egerton, “remember the Colonel’s condition.”

“He is right,” said the Colonel; “he has every reason to doubt my honour. I did not think that I should ever lie quiet, and say it served me right, if a man told me to my face that he did not believe my word. But I tried to rob Mr. Branscombe of his wife—and God knows I loved her—and then I hit him from behind, like a cur that I was! But the thought of losing her maddened me. May Heaven forgive me!”

Then the handsome, brave Colonel Mannerling, whose noble ways and martial bearing had made so many tender hearts flutter, and whose soldierly appearance and well-knit figure were the envy even of the men, burst into tears, like a weak woman, before him whom he had injured, and who had saved his life to punish him.

Even Ralph was moved, while Egerton Paull gave up any attempt at coldness.

“Do not be agitated, Colonel Mannerling; calm yourself. I for one believe you, and Branscombe, I am sure, will not doubt you any longer. Only be calm, and tell us what you know.”

The Colonel gradually recovered. “Mr. Branscombe,” he said, raising himself on one arm, and attempting to be firm, “you have a right to disbelieve me. You may consider me a liar and a sneak; I have lost the right to feel insulted, and the

power to avenge it. I cannot even sit up to speak to you. I have done my worst to make your life miserable, and to ruin your home. But God knows," and he raised his weak right hand solemnly, "that I am guiltless of this crime ! I have nothing to tell you that you do not know."

"Have you not written to Mrs. Branscombe nor seen her since—since that night ?" asked Ralph.

The Colonel had sunk back exhausted.

"I wrote to her once, two days afterwards, to the place where I used to write before—before that night. The letter came back in a week, unopened. I can show it you. Please will you open that dressing-case ? the key is on my watch-chain."

Egerton soon found the letter with its various postmarks. "That," the Colonel said, "was the last letter I ever wrote to her. In it I told her that I bitterly repented my conduct to you in the train. I made a lame attempt to justify myself. You may read it, if you please. But she has never read it, of that I am sure. Soon afterwards, I heard of Sir Henry's death. I have not had a line from Mrs. Branscombe, nor have I seen her since, as sure as there is a God !"

And with this sacred oath on his lips, he fell back on his pillow. They had to call the doctor in to revive him, but no doubt now remained even on Ralph's mind. Diana had not gone back to her old lover.

Before they left Torquay they saw Colonel Mannerling once more. "Mr. Branscombe," said the soldier, "my passion for her maddened me, and I committed an act I have repented ever since. I was ready to forget duty and honour for the sake of obtaining what I thought was the one prize worth living for. I broke the laws of hospitality, and I treacherously persuaded her to fly from your roof. Then, in my frenzied fear of losing the prize which was within my grasp, I attacked you like a garotter, and tried to kill you. All in vain ; I did not gain her, and my conscience tells me that I behaved in a manner totally unworthy of an officer and a gentleman. But I have conquered my mad passion. You will find her again—and believe me, you *will* find

her—perhaps hidden in some remote place, perhaps in poverty, but still proud, pure, and noble, and more worthy of your love than ever."

Ralph was going without more than a formal "Good morning," but the Colonel called him back.

"You saved my life at the peril of your own the other day," said he, "and I have not even thanked you."

"Don't," remarked Ralph, briefly.

"But I must, and I do, from the bottom of my heart. Look at me, Bransecombe. If ever there was a repentant sinner, I am he. Will you ever forgive me for what I have done?"

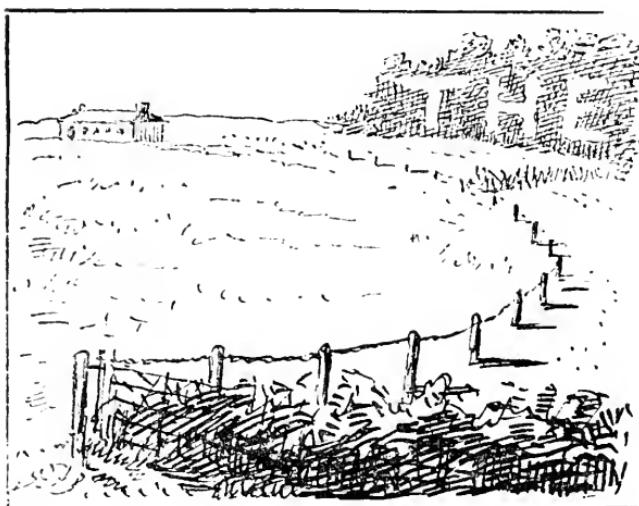
"Perhaps I will when I have found her. Good-bye, Colonel Mannerling."



"I have brought the Colonel's things, sir."

CHAPTER XLI.

FOUND.



MONTHS of early spring were spent by Mr. Throgmorton Toms in his midland retreat. They were not months of pure gladness to the ex-financier, for he did not make

such rapid progress as he expected in the noble sports he had chosen. Notwithstanding all Major Hunt's instructions he was unable to repress a certain nervousness when riding at a fence, and the nervousness somehow communicated itself to his horses, so that many refused with him that went straight enough under the Major. And a couple of falls he got with Sir S. Seantlebury's staghounds when he ventured to ride behind that flying pack, sent him back to the Beechley in the ploughed fields and the woodlands, where he could potter and coffeehouse to his heart's content. It was not the love of hound nor of fox nor of horse which had brought Toms to Drayton, but merely ambition, and this ambition he thought would be just as easily gratified by chatting at covert-side as by jumping oxers and galloping over big fields. In driving, he was more fortunate, and was soon able to tool a pair of spanking bays along the smooth roads round

Drayton with some certainty and more assurance. Before Easter the Major had got a team together for him, and the little man gradually gave up hunting in favour of driving lessons, which he considered less dangerous. His horses, his money, and Major Hunt's glib tongue had gained him many acquaintances whom he termed friends. Besides small fry there were among them a Lord Riversfield, the impecunious descendant of a long line of illustrious ancestors, and Mr. Colney, the wealthy American speculator, who had brought his pretty wife to Drayton, and hunted at a respectful distance behind her. So, as the spring advanced, Mr. Toms began to see the results of his lessons and the objects of his ambition becoming gradually nearer. But on the other hand his increasing satisfaction was moderated by the news he obtained from town. Penner & Inkstone were really going to fight the will, and a big law-suit was imminent. Pickum, Bones & Co. assured him that they had no doubt as to the result, but he had to answer questions which were inconvenient even when asked in the privacy of their office, and which he felt would be horribly disagreeable in a public court. He had to recall every detail of the late Sir Henry's instructions to him, and to repeat these details to his lawyers. He was warned not to mention certain circumstances which he would have liked to forget, and to remember others which in his heart of hearts he confessed had never occurred. When the will was propounded he knew that it might be attacked, and yet the attack, when it was really threatened, was quite as terrifying as if it had been unexpected. Still he bore up bravely, secure in his steady and careful observation of all legal formalities throughout all his transactions with the late Sir Henry Branscombe. And it really appeared as if Penner & Inkstone were fighting a hopeless case. Ralph and his wife having been abroad, evidence as to Sir Henry's mental inability was most difficult to obtain. Mrs. Gore was not to be found, and without her the lawyers despaired. Mr. Paulovitch had long since given up the game, and Ralph was prosecuting a fruitless search for his wife with the help of Egerton Paull.

Notwithstanding Toms' anxiety, however, he determined on driving the Blue Light coach to Hardwick twice a week during the season.

Meanwhile the apostacy of the Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson had thrown a gloom over the house at Silverstone. Poor Marian was to all intents and purposes an orphan, her drunken father being quite unfit to take care of her, and though she had a friend and mother in Miss Nettlerash, the collapse of that lady's ideal had not improved her temper, and the young girl was very unhappy. After a few weeks Miss Janet herself began to think that things were very dull. She had no more lectures to attend, and she had lost her faith in the apostles of new doctrines. There seemed to be nothing more to do for Ralph, as the lawyers had told her that her evidence would not be material. With her sister she was not on the best of terms, and Warboro' had no new gossip. Sir George and her nephew appeared to have sunk into an abject state of inactivity,—action, in Miss Nettlerash's mind, consisting of rapid railway journeys and the packing and unpacking of carpet-bags. Even the Middlesex Club was dull; there were no rows and the secretary was polite. In short, there was no more excitement, and Miss Nettlerash was wretched without it. So one morning Marian was startled and pleased by the following announcement :

“Marian dear, you don't look well. I feel dull too, with all these sad losses. I think a trip abroad would do us good. I've decided that you and I and Miss Smith will go to the Continent for three months. I've never been out of England, and I should like to see France and Germany before I'm too old to travel.”

Of course the scheme was much applauded by the girl and her governess, and soon the house was crowded with trunks and noisy with the noise of packing. The horses were easily disposed of by being turned into loose boxes for a rest, the cellar locked up, the servants put on board wages, and the furniture covered with holland. Miss Nettlerash's packages were varied in size and infinite in number, but space and a regard for our reader's

patience forbid us to tell of her difficulties at foreign custom-houses, of her quarrels with the railway officials, and of the sums she paid away for over-weight. She started with ample funds and plenty of good introductions ; for though not exactly an attractive woman she was undoubtedly a respectable one, and most of her friends were glad to recommend her to any one they knew abroad, if only to speed her on her way and get rid of her for a few months.

It was the middle of May when they reached Vienna, which Miss Nettlerash had decided was to be the most distant point of her journey. She had been strongly advised to visit the capital of Austria, which, fine as it always is, never looks more beautiful than at this particular season, before the hot sun has converted its wide streets into miniature Saharas, and before its inhabitants have all fled to the lovely green hills which surround it. On the whole, the party had had a successful tour. After the first week, which witnessed a succession of battles between Miss Nettlerash and all the persons with whom she came in contact, matters had gradually quieted. Miss Nettlerash in fact began to pride herself on the continental ways she had acquired. She chattered unintelligible French, and stammered Anglo-German with a persistence which extorted admiration if it did not ensure her being understood, and she was a more determined and indefatigable sight-seer than Marian herself, though the latter possessed all the freshness of extreme youth. At Vienna they lodged in the Grand Hotel, and after presenting their letters of introduction visited the galleries and churches, and were in due course invited to a dinner. Their Viennese friends being anxious to show all the civility they could to the old lady, enquired whether there was anything particular they wished to see, in which they could assist.

“ You are very kind,” said Miss Nettlerash. “ My niece (for Marian was always thus called) is very anxious to see the Empress. But I understand from Sir Andrew Buchanan that Her Majesty does not grant audiences unless people have been pre-

sented at Court in London, so I am afraid she will have to give it up."

"It is difficult," said their host.

"You can see the Empress every morning in the Freudenau," suggested the son of the house, in good English. "She rides from six to seven with Miss Lascelles."

"If you can get up so early and drive there you will see her well," said the host.

"Indeed?" asked Miss Nettlerash, "and can we get near her?"

"Oh yes!" replied the young man, "only you must not use an opera glass. There is a regular steeplechase course laid out there, and any one can go, only they don't get up early enough. The Empress tries her horses over the fences."

"Oh do let us go, Aunt Janet," exclaimed Marian, "I should so like to see the Empress riding."

Miss Nettlerash said she did not object, as their host's son volunteered to escort them, so an open carriage was ordered for half-past five on the following morning. The Freudenau is a fine park-like portion of the Prater, where the race meetings are held. It is three miles from the city, and therefore free from crowds at any time, and absolutely deserted at that early hour. When they reached it they saw no one at all, except two grooms on well-bred horses, and a couple of mounted policemen. With them the young man had a little conversation, which ended in his handing them a bit of paper which looked suspiciously like a five florin note. When the guardians of the peace were convinced that the party were not social democrats nor political spies, the carriage was allowed to draw up near one of the hurdles. After a short time two figures on horseback emerged from a row of stabling in the distance, followed by several others. The latter group soon stopped, but the two came on at a sharp trot, and were seen to be ladies. Both were mounted on high-bred English hunters: both were tall and dark. The leading one, however, was much the younger of the two. She was, like her companion, dressed in a plain hunting-habit and a low-crowned



"Here they come!"

man's hat, but unlike her companion, she kept looking back. Before they reached the hurdles she pulled up.

"The older lady behind is the Empress," said the young Viennese.

"Who is the other?" inquired Miss Nettlerash.

"That is Miss Laseelles, the English riding mistress. She has only been here a few months, and used to teach at the *manège*, but the Empress has taken a great fancy to her, and she rides with her every morning and trains the young horses for hunting."

"I wish they would come nearer," exclaimed Marian; "I can't see the Empress' face a bit."

"Patience, Fraülein," said the young man; "Her Majesty is giving her orders. See, they are turning round to have a run at the jump."

"Look at Miss Laseelles," the young Viennese went on. "She is very pretty, but all the admiration of the young nobility is wasted on her. She won't take any notice of the best of them, and refuses even bouquets. Here they come!"

Down they came at the hurdles, the English girl in front. Her Majesty was evidently on a young one, and wanted a lead. When within twenty yards of the carriage Miss Laseelles chirrupped to her horse, who gave a great bound and cleared the hurdle with a foot to spare, while his rider never moved on the saddle. Marian was watching the Empress, whose horse tried to swerve, but was forced over by firm hands and a judicious dig with the spur.

"Oh! how beautiful she is, Aunt Janet, and a grandmother, too! Look how she rides!"

But Miss Nettlerash's eyes were fixed on the other figure, who was now cantering away on the smooth turf. Her face seemed turned to stone. "My dear!" she at last exclaimed, "Did you see Miss Laseelles?"

"Yes, Aunt," answered Marian. "Why?"

"Well? Don't you know her?"

"No, Aunt Janet, how should I? She is very handsome, but I have never seen her before."

"Why child," almost shrieked Miss Janet, gripping Marian's arm tightly, "Where are your eyes?" Then she whispered, hoarsely, "It is Ralph's wife. It is Diana Branscombe."

"Surely you are mistaken?" suggested Marian, whose first thought was that her white lie on the subject of her visit to the Hall must now be discovered.

"No! I was never more certain of anything in my life. I should like to see them once more," she said aloud to their *cicerone*.

This was arranged by the coachman driving quickly across the course, so as to meet the pair at the bend for home. They passed at full gallop, Miss Laseelles being on the inside and therefore nearest the carriage.

"Now do you see?" asked Miss Nettlerash.

"I suppose it is," replied Marian, staring.

"Suppose? you stupid child, of course it is," replied Miss Nettlerash, who then gave the order for home, but almost forgot to thank the young man for his politeness. Before he was well out of the hotel, having wished the ladies a good appetite for breakfast, Miss Nettlerash had written a telegram.

From	To
JANET NETTLERASH, GRAND HOTEL, VIENNA,	RALPH BRANSCOMBE, BRANSCOMBE HALL, WARBORO', ENGLAND.

"I have found her. Come instantly. Say nothing."

On the next morning but one Miss Nettlerash rose at five and drove off by herself. She would not allow anyone to accompany her to the station. The train from Calais was due at six.

"Where is she?" was Ralph's instant question as he jumped out of the carriage. He looked a different man again. There

was a light in his eyes, and a spring in his gait, which none had seen for months.

Miss Nettlerash told him what she had seen and ascertained, little more than the reader already knows. The only additional information she had gained in the interval, through the hotel commissionnaire, who knows everything, and if he does not, will find it out, was that Miss Lascelles lived with an English lady, her companion, received no one, and scarcely ever went out except to give her lessons.

"Now you must be careful, Ralph," said Miss Nettlerash, when she had told her tale. "If she suspects that you are here, she will run away again. You must take her by surprise. You must get in under an assumed name."

"But how? What name?" asked Ralph.

The old lady reflected for a few minutes, while they were being driven to the hotel. Then she spoke.

"You can talk German, can't you, Ralph?"

"Fairly well," replied he.

"Well then, I will give you old Aronsen's card. He is my banker, and won't be any the wiser, and if he does, I should not mind. Write on it in German, 'to consult Fräulein Lascelles about riding lessons for my daughter.' That will disarm suspicion. She won't receive any young man, I hear."

"I should think not, indeed," exclaimed Ralph.

Miss Nettlerash shrugged her shoulders. "Well, she seems to have behaved very well here, at any rate. I have not been able to discover anything at all against her."

If Miss Nettlerash could not find out anything against a woman, that woman's life must indeed be blameless. So much Ralph knew, and was satisfied for the present. He had to wait till late in the morning before he walked off, with a beating heart and Mr. Aronsen's card in his pocket.

Miss Nettlerash directed him to "Burggasse 21, 3^{ter} Stock," a large house close to the Imperial stables, divided, like all Vienna houses, into flats. On a door was fastened a card, with the words: "Miss Lascelles, Lehrerin der Hohen Schule."

He rang with trembling hands, and no one answered the bell for some time. He rang again, and while waiting observed a small grating in the door, such as is very often used in Vienna. It enables people inside to see who the visitor is before opening the door. Ralph quickly guessed its use, and stood sideways, with his back towards it. At last some one came, and a voice asked in German through the grating, "Who is there?"

"Herr Aronsen," answered Ralph, also in German, and as firmly as he could, "about riding lessons for my daughter."

The door was opened, and scarcely was it ajar before Ralph had placed his foot inside. It was well he did so, for the person who answered the bell was no other than Mrs. Gore.

"Mr. Branscombe!" she exclaimed, in great surprise.

"Yes, Mrs. Gore, it is I." He pushed his way in and quickly shut the door. "I have come to fetch my wife."

"You can't come in. She won't let you. I must go and tell her," stammered Mrs. Gore, anxious and irresolute.

"No, you must not tell her! Mrs. Gore, dear Mrs. Gore," cried Ralph, quickly. "It has all been a dreadful mistake. I have come to fetch her home. We have both been wrong all through. I love her most dearly, and I have come to bring her back just as if nothing had ever happened. Let me go in."

"I can't, indeed," said Mrs. Gore, retreating to cover the entrance into the inner room. "You must not come in."

"What is the matter?" asked a voice from inside, which sent all Ralph's blood coursing through his veins at a gallop. "Who are you talking English to, dear?"

And a figure clad in some soft dark stuff appeared from the sitting-room. Her small head was bent slightly forward as she opened the door; those great black eyes looked an inquiry, and she slipped into the ante-room quite unconsciously.

"Ralph!" she suddenly exclaimed, stopping as if petrified.

In this nineteenth century it is of course absurd for a man to throw himself at a woman's feet. Even figuratively it cannot be tolerated. But regardless of good form and of the hard parquet,

full only of his great woe, Ralph sprang forward and knelt down before his wife. Seizing her hand, he exclaimed :

“ Diana, darling ! I have come for you ! I love you more than my life, more than I ever did. Come back to me, dearest, and forgive me the harsh words I uttered ; I did not mean them.”

He kissed her hands passionately. Diana was startled out of her pride and out of her resolves. He went on :

“ I have looked for you, oh so wearily, ever since you went away ! I have not slept for thinking of you, and I have no home without you. My life is blasted for want of my beautiful wife. I know you are still good and pure ; come back, dearest, come back to me ! ”

“ I am not worthy of you, Ralph, dear,” she said, gently, stooping to him. “ Get up. I am not good enough for you to kneel to me. I was a bad wife to you, and you are better without me. I shall only be in your way.”

“ My life is an abomination to me without you,” cried Ralph, rising. “ My darling, my darling, do you not know yet how I love you ? Do not turn away, dearest ; you have something to forgive, for I drove you away by my harsh words. Come back to me now and let us forget all. I can do nothing, I can think of nothing, but of you and you only.”

Then at last the barriers of pride broke down, and Diana’s icy reserve melted before Ralph’s warm kisses. She burst into tears and fell unresistingly into his arms.

“ If you will take me, I will come,” she sobbed out. “ Oh Ralph, how wicked I have been not to appreciate such a love as yours.”

* * * * *

“ Ralph, darling,” whispered Diana, an hour later, when he left to go and announce his success to Miss Nettlerash, “ Ralph, darling ! I have loved you ever since that dreadful night. I shall never even care to look at any one else.”

* * * * *

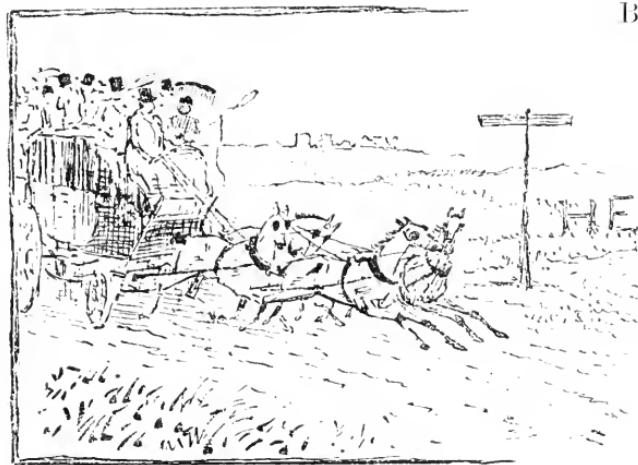
It was not easy for Diana to obtain the Empress’ permission to

leave Vienna, and at one time the pair thought that it would be necessary to fly secretly. Miss Nettlerash, who had been the instrument of restoring Ralph's happiness to him, was overwhelmed with affection by both. She and Marian returned to England long before the needful leave of absence had been granted. But at last it was obtained, and the happy pair started very leisurely on their homeward journey.



CHAPTER XLII.

THE END.



BLUE LIGHT

Coach, which runs three times a week from Piccadilly to Hardwick and back, changes horses at Silverstone. The Blue Light is, perhaps, not

quite as fashionable as the Brighton Wonder, but after Mr. Throgmorton Toms was persuaded to take it up it made a great stride forward. Major Hunt selected some very good teams, and the total distance of thirty miles was divided into four stages, so that none of them should have too much work. It was on the 1st of June that the Blue Light began its season, and for some days Major Hunt handled the ribbons, of which Mr. Toms took charge occasionally for a mile or two on the level. But after a week or so Mr. Toms, whose circle of fashionable acquaintances was rapidly increasing, noticed that some of his swell friends did not take very kindly to the Major, of whom they probably knew too much. This supposition, which became a certainty on the occasion of Mrs. Throgmorton Toms' first grand dinner party, made the little

City man very anxious to dispense with the constant presence of his adviser. In her own drawing-room Mrs. Toms had heard so much about the Major's past life from her friendly gossips, that she was still more desirous than her husband of kicking down the ladder which had helped them up. Mr. Toms now felt pretty sure of his driving powers, but he had the best reasons in the world not to quarrel with the gallant Irishman. He wished still to employ him as a sort of superior stud-groom, but no longer to have him continually at his side as an intimate friend. Major Hunt was quite sharp enough to see something of what was in the little man's mind, and Major Hunt was far too much a "man of the world" to remain where he was not wanted. He had quite as cogent reasons as Toms himself for wishing to avoid a rupture, and it was a matter of comparative indifference to him whether he increased his income by sitting on the box of a smart coach or by taking literally a "back seat." Therefore, when, towards the middle of June, Mr. Toms announced his intention of intrusting the ribbons to Lord Riversfield, the Major made no objection, and when the little owner took charge of them himself on the next journey, while Lady Riversfield occupied the seat of honour, and his lordship sat directly behind them, the Major also acquiesced, and even alleged an important engagement in town so as to give his patron ample elbow-room.

Now the inn where they changed horses at Silverstone was in the High Street, at its intersection with South Street. Coming up the latter you stop at the "Rake and Rabbithutch," where it widens out and becomes the North Road; it also becomes steeper, and the last bit, before you come to the bridge over the Ooze, is very steep indeed. On the other side of the bridge the road takes a sharp turn to the right, following the beautiful green valley of the river. To the left is Miss Nettle-rash's lawn, sloping gently up to her old-fashioned red-brick house; to the right is the Ooze, and on the other side of the Ooze the quaint old town of Silverstone, which has not yet

become suburban here, where it is most remote from London. It is a pretty drive, and at this portion of it those who do not know the route point out to each other the red-tiled roofs of the town, the windings of the river below the weed-grown old-fashioned back gardens, and the massive grey towers of the abbey which crown the slope.

On this Wednesday the Blue Light changed horses at the “Rake and Rabbit Hutch” as usual. Mr. Toms was a little tired of driving, but he did not like to say so. The first team of greys out of town had given him a job through Islington, and though the bays which came next did not pull so hard, and though the country road was a delightful change after the crowded streets, he felt rather weary. But he did not like to give up his place. So far he had got on capitally with Lady Riversfield, whom his wife had particularly charged him to please, and he was beginning to wish to please her on his own account as well, for she was an attractive and still handsome woman. If he gave up the reins, it must be to his lordship, and Lady Riversfield, who for financial reasons of her husband’s, also wished to please Mr. Toms, made a most fascinating little grimace when Toms suggested this, and archly asked him whether he was tired of her? He was not at all tired of her, but he was horribly tired of driving, and felt that he must have something to restore him, or give up. So he indulged in the, to him, most unusual luxury of a pint of champagne in a pewter, while her ladyship sipped a little out of a wineglass, and the other passengers took various “nips” in the six minutes allowed them. When the wine was drunk, and all was ready, Mr. Toms felt quite strong again, and took hold of the hot browns he now had in hand with fresh courage. He was obliged to walk them through the narrow High Street, which was crowded with carts, for it was market day, and for some distance a couple of careful ostlers, who had not very much confidence in Mr. Toms’ driving, kept up with the coach. As soon as he was clear of the carts, however, he let them break into a trot, and from the trot they broke into a

canter, which he soon felt he would be unable to control long. The hill was steep, and the break did not prevent the fresh browns going faster than he at all liked. He tried to pull up altogether, but the attempt was a failure. He would have rejoiced now if Lord Riversfield had taken the ribbons, but his lordship was deep in conversation with pretty Mrs. Colney by his side, and it would not do to interrupt the only lord he knew in an incipient flirtation. The well-bred horses were rattling down the hill at a pace which might not have been dangerous for an experienced and powerful coachman, but was likely to lead to mischief with so inexperienced and so slight a man on the box as our City friend. In two minutes the bridge was reached, and Toms felt that once round the corner he should get on all right on the smooth road up the valley. But there was a string of carts coming towards the bridge on that smooth valley road. Someone blew the horn, and they slowly drew to the left—far too slowly, as is the wont of agricultural drivers. The horses galloped over the bridge and swung round sharp into the accustomed track. But it was not yet clear; they turned more sharply than the driver wished, and the box of the off fore wheel locked itself between the great heavy spokes of the leading cart. There was a loud crash of breaking timbers; the leaders reared up, while the wheelers plunged wildly forward in their endeavours to pull the coach through the unwonted obstacle. Then the passengers seemed to be swinging rapidly through the air, and the coach went over on its side with a loud thud.

The screams of the women and the yells of the men soon brought a crowd round them. The noise was so great that even Miss Nettlerash heard it. Marian and her governess rushed out first and opened the little wicket-gate. Miss Janet and her maid hobbled down the lawn to see what had happened; the coachman and his helper rushed out of the stable-yard by a short cut, and climbed the fence in their hurry. Some of the men were picking up the passengers, most of whom were more frightened and dirty than hurt. Lady Riversfield was helped

out of the ditch, with no more serious injury than a coat of mud. Mrs. Colney had bruised her arm and torn her smart costume. Lord Riversfield was shaken, and bleeding from a cut on his hand. The others were more or less knocked about, covered with dirt, and torn ; but there seemed to be no serious case until one of the grooms asked whether anyone “had seen the governor ?” After a short search, poor little Toms was found in the bottom of the ditch, quite unconscious. There were marks of blood on his head, his coat-sleeve was ripped up, and his hat, completely smashed, lay on the inside of the fence.

“Bring that gentleman in at once,” cried Miss Nettlerash, from her side of the gate, for she had not ventured into the crowd. “Bring in anyone that is hurt !”

Mr. Toms was soon picked up, two sturdy fellows supporting his little body while another took charge of his short legs. None of the other men would accept the offer. After a little while spent in examining their hurts they all declared that they could walk back to the “Rake and Rabbit-hutch,” and get their wants attended to. The two ladies, however, spent a short half-hour in Miss Nettlerash’s bed-room, and, with Marian’s assistance, repaired damages.

“Good gracious !” exclaimed Miss Nettlerash, when she approached the wounded man, who was laid on the spare bed, the Eden from which Mr. C. T. Mudbury Dawson had been driven, “it is that wicked little Mr. Toms ! Oh dear, oh dear ! who would have thought that I should have to cherish the serpent in my bosom !”

Miss Janet, of course, spoke figuratively. The spare bed, with its French spring mattress, did duty for her bosom, and did it very well. But the poor lady felt the position as acutely as if she were really obliged to embrace Mr. Toms and recall him to life by maidenly kisses. She sent for the nearest doctor at once, while her maid administered the usual restoratives, which were at first quite without result.

Dr. Pyburn found the women all excited and useless, and had

to call in the coachman to help him. Some time elapsed before the door of the spare room again opened, and Miss Nettlerash spent the interval in deep reflection. Her sudden excitement had apparently subsided, but the incessant motion of her hands, and the nervous way in which she nodded her head whenever she heard a sound, betrayed that her mind was hard at work. Marian, Miss Smith, and the maid were busy with the ladies, who were now quite ready to go away, and only waited for decency's sake, as Lady Riversfield said, to hear the doctor's verdict.

At last he came out of the room, and was met by Miss Nettlerash on the stairs.

"You had better send for his wife, if the gentleman is married," said Dr. Pyburn, who was not very fond of Miss Nettlerash, for her crusades on behalf of hydropathy and all new medical or empirical fancies had made her a terror to regular practitioners.

"Is he very bad? is he dying?" gasped Miss Nettlerash.

Dr. Pyburn was far more frank than he would have been to average old ladies, and replied,

"He is not in a hopeless condition, but no one can tell what turn things may take. He has broken two ribs, he has concussion of the brain, and probably some internal injury."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Miss Janet, while Marian, who had crept up in her black dress, listened horror-struck. "It is a judgment on him!"

"I do not pretend to know that," the doctor went on. "I have nothing to do with judgments. Send for his wife, and I will telegraph for a professional nurse. What is the gentleman's name?"

"Must he stop here, then?" asked Miss Nettlerash.

"Certainly," replied the doctor. "It would be simply fatal to move him. You must keep him till he gets better, or—dies," he added, rather roughly.

This was indeed a sore trial to the poor lady, who had taken

Ralph's cause far more to heart than even Ralph himself. She hated Mr. Toms with a hatred far surpassing the hatred of men. To her he represented the embodiment of all that was worldly, false, vile, and cruel. Her disappointment in regard to Mr. C. T. Mudbury Dawson had been great, and all the love she had cherished for that clergyman, with much more, was now turned into a more natural channel, and was lavished on Ralph. Those who injured Ralph were her enemies; those who loved him were her friends. And now she was obliged to offer hospitality to the man who had so cruelly injured her nephew, and not only ordinary hospitality, but devoted attention and nursing, and all the trouble which is trying enough even for those who love their patients. But although her ideas of duty were sometimes peculiar, she had no hesitation to-day. Of course the man must remain there, and she would do all she could to save him. The work before her was thoroughly distasteful, but who was she to quarrel with the Divine decrees? Perhaps it was all for her good, and that of those she loved; perhaps she was the instrument specially selected to lead this wretched man back into the right path. Who could tell? At any rate she would do her duty.

The ladies departed with many conventional expressions of sorrow. A telegram was sent to Mrs. Throgmorton Toms, and everything was done that could be done. The fashionable wife arrived, and proved herself once more a woman of the world. She made no exaggerated display of grief, but she behaved exactly as a distressed wife in the higher circles ought to do. She was gently and sorrowfully thankful to Miss Nettlerash: she was polite and grateful to the servants and the governess: she was cool and sensible with the doctor. She suggested a consultation with Sir Davenport Harley, and she telegraphed to him at once, but she did not forget to summon Major Hunt, so that the necessary orders might be given as to horses, carriages, contemplated social plans, and all the other worldly duties which had been so rudely interrupted by the morning's accident.

Miss Nettlerash and Marian calculated that Ralph and Diana would now be on their homeward journey, somewhere in Switzerland. The necessary telegrams were dispatched. Sir Davenport Harley's opinion agreed with that of his provincial colleague: Mr. Toms was very seriously hurt, and time only would show whether he would recover from his injuries. Major Hunt came and went away again, and the nurse was installed in a little dressing-room adjoining the invalid's chamber, while the "bachelor's room" was arranged for Mrs. Toms. The sick man gradually regained consciousness, and in a couple of days they knew that though he might not ultimately recover, yet he was not likely to die immediately. So gradually matters resumed their regular course. Miss Nettlerash was more silent than she had ever been. She scarcely noticed what she ate and drank, she did not worry about the linen and the dairy, and she went to no meetings. Mr. Dawson's behaviour had disgusted her with the Anti-Tobacco League, and she neglected the Anti-Vaccination Society. She spoke in monosyllables, and appeared quite absorbed in her thoughts. Instead of the tracts against tobacco, and the books about new medical discoveries which had been her favourite reading, she now spent most of her time over the Bible. But she, who used to ask more questions than any other human being, now grew quite irritable if she was herself asked any. Once Marian suggested that she seemed dull, and ought not to be so much alone.

"I am looking for advice and help where I ought to look!" she answered. "I don't want to see any one. I have my adviser here," and she slapped her open Bible with a vigour which made her bugles tingle.

Miss Nettlerash made it her duty, if not her pleasure, to visit the sick man's room at least twice a day. Mr. Toms was soon informed of his whereabouts, and as he had always looked on Miss Nettlerash as a harmless, though somewhat tiresome, lunatic, he did not mind her coming in to inquire after his progress. In fact, after a few days he felt as grateful to her as

he could feel to any one. Dr. Pyburn did not like her, but he told his patient that he owed his life to her care, and Mrs. Toms said that the house was all that could be desired. Everything was neat and clean and quiet ; the servants were attentive, and no single one of the numerous wants of a sick room was ever unsupplied. So it soon became quite the usual thing that Miss Nettlerash should come in, ask Mr. Toms how he felt this morning, and sit down for a minute or two. She would then contemplate the sick man, glaring through her spectacles at the bandaged head and the livid face of the once rosy Toms, the pillows, and the physic bottles. If she noticed any tendency to fidget, she would approach him, and alter the position of the pillows very gently and very tenderly, or would pour out for him and administer a spoonful of some medicine, but she never talked. Her remarks were very brief, and absolutely confined to the matter in hand. “ Could you manage a little beef-tea ? ” or “ Was the lemonade right ? ” or, again, “ I will send you another coverlet,” were the limits of her conversation.

About a week after the accident Mrs. Toms announced that she was going to town for the day. Her husband was now out of immediate danger. Miss Nettlerash knew, though Mrs. Toms did not, that his ultimate recovery was no more probable than before ; but there was no likelihood of a catastrophe. Mrs. Throgmorton Toms had many duties to perform in town, and felt that she could safely leave her husband in Miss Nettlerash’s care. Hitherto she had sat in his room all the morning working, reading, or writing, and ready to attend to his wants while the nurse slept. Miss Nettlerash seemed much pleased with Mrs. Toms’ announcement, and assured her that the invalid should be well looked after, and should not be alone for a minute. In fact, the old lady was livelier and more herself than she had been for some time. She placed the greys at Mrs. Toms’ disposal, and heaved a sigh of relief when the carriage had turned out of the gate into the London road. A few minutes later she was sitting in an arm-chair in the sick-room, her spectacles on her

nose, and her knitting lying on her lap. Mr. Toms had been "made comfortable for the day," as the nurse expressed it, and was no longer obliged to lie flat in bed. He was bolstered up by a complicated apparatus and a number of pillows, and was able occasionally to read a few lines of the morning paper. But no more than a few lines. He soon dropped it, and every now and then a groan of pain would escape him. Miss Nettlerash glared at him longer and more persistently than usual.

"Mr. Toms," she at last said, suddenly, "have you made your will?"

"My will?—I?" asked the invalid, startled, "why?"

"Wretched man!" replied Miss Janet, "you are going to your account!"

"But, Miss Nettlerash, the doctor says I am better. And I am sure I feel much better."

Miss Nettlerash sniffed. "Pooh, pooh!" she said, "the doctors are humbugs. They keep on telling a man he is better till he goes to his eternal damnation. *I* don't believe the doctors, and I never did."

"Oh," exclaimed Mr. Toms, feebly, "what have they been telling you? Don't say they think I am going to die! Don't, please don't!"

"Don't be frightened, Toms," answered Miss Janet, harshly; "don't be a coward as well as a cheat."

"How dare you speak like that?" cried the invalid, in a querulous, quavering voice. "You know how ill I am, and you take advantage of it. Go away."

"I shall not go, Toms," replied Miss Nettlerash, firmly. "It is my duty to speak to you, and I will. I shall not be deterred by any nonsensical feelings of delicacy. You have cheated Ralph Branscombe out of his inheritance. How will you answer for that wickedness before the great Judgment-seat?"

"I have not cheated any one," murmured Toms, shutting his eyes to avoid Miss Nettlerash's glare.



“ You are a contemptible wretch,” continued the lady, “ and you think you will still live to enjoy your ill-gotten wealth. But you are wrong. Throgmorton Toms, you are in a fool’s paradise. There is the shadow of death on your face.”

“ Oh ! ” groaned Mr. Toms ; “ oh, Miss Nettlerash, don’t.”

But the determined old lady did not heed him. “ You have defrauded Ralph and his foolish father. If my brother-in-law were not such a donkey, it would not have happened. But though he is a donkey you had no right to cheat him. You made Sir Henry Brancombe sign that will when he was out of his mind.”

“ No,” said Mr. Toms, weakly, “ no, indeed I did not. He was quite himself.”

“ It is not true, Throgmorton Toms, you know it is not true. You are going to appear before your Maker with a lie on your lips, and with roguery in your black heart.”

“ Oh, this is too dreadful ! ” groaned the unfortunate man. “ Go away, go away ; I am not going to die.”

“ Any one but a fool could see that your days are numbered,” repeated the pitiless woman. “ They call you a sharp City man. Sharp, indeed ! I call you an idiot if you fancy you will get better.”

“ Oh, you dreadful woman ! ” cried poor little Toms ; “ oh ! ” and then he burst into tears, more genuine than those he had shed at Brancombe Hall.

Miss Nettlerash stretched her arm out menacingly, standing close to the bed. “ Repent while it is yet time, Throgmorton Toms,” she cried. “ Repent, I say, for to you is vouchsafed a great mercy. You may still make good some of the evil you have done. But if you now harden your black heart, and turn back from the right path, there will be no mercy on your wicked soul ! ”

Toms nearly fainted, but not quite. Miss Nettlerash applied vinegar to his temples, and he sighed, and groaned, and opened

his eyes. "Go away," he again murmured, "go away; I want the nurse."

"No!" she said. "Do you feel the black shadow of death coming over you? It is the grave which will swallow you up unless you turn and repent! I shall not go. This is my house; this is my room. Providence has entrusted me with a great task, and I will carry it through. Will you die in your sin, Throgmorton Toms?"

"What am I to do?" gasped the invalid, feebly.

"Do? Send for your rascally lawyer, Mr. Bones, and give orders to have that money restored of which you robbed my brother-in-law and my nephew."

Even in his extreme peril, frightened as he was, Mr. Toms was consistent. A gleam of satisfaction shot across his wan face when Miss Nettlerash mentioned Mr. Bones. In his tortuous brain, weak and shaken, there arose the thought that it would be easy to give his lawyer a few instructions which would keep Miss Nettlerash quiet without necessitating the restoration of a single penny.

"Very well, Miss Nettlerash," groaned the patient, "send for Bones. His address is 140, New Square, Lincoln's Inn." And then he really fainted.

Long before Mrs. Toms had finished her shopping, not only Mr. Bones, but Mr. Inkstone and Sir Davenport Harley were at Silverstone. Miss Nettlerash had not let the grass grow under her feet. She sent for a fly, and took the first train to town, though she hated trains. She herself fetched the two lawyers and the great physician, all of whom she had advised by telegram. On the way back she explained matters with great clearness. They were in a first-class carriage by themselves, Mr. Bones feeling rather uncomfortable, Sir Davenport Harley somewhat surprised, and Mr. Inkstone in a calm state of expectation.

"Guard," she said, deliberately, when the man clipped their tickets at King's Cross, "we are going to Silverstone. We don't

want to be disturbed. Here is half-a-crown." And, for a wonder, she produced the coin without lifting up her dress. But it must be admitted that she had spent most of the time from Lincoln's Inn to the station in searching for it.

"Now, Sir Davenport," she began, as soon as the train had cleared the tunnels, "do you recollect Sir Henry Branscombe?"

"Perfectly, madam," replied Sir Davenport. "In fact, I have been consulted about him by both these gentlemen." And he bowed towards the two lawyers.

"Very well. Mr. Bones, you will be good enough not to talk at present. Listen to what I have got to say, and you may chatter as much as you like afterwards. Sir Davenport, is it not your professional opinion that Mr. Toms is very unlikely to recover?"

"Well," replied the physician, stroking his chin, "I have seen worse cases recover, and I have seen less serious injuries result in death."

"At any rate," continued Miss Nettlerash, "he is in a very serious condition?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And he ought to settle all his affairs?"

"I think so," replied Sir Davenport: "the worst might happen at any time."

"Is he in a fit state to do so?" continued Miss Nettlerash.

"Quite, I think," answered the doctor. "At any rate, his mind was perfectly clear the day before yesterday. Weak, of course, very weak, but not a bit off his head now. Pyburn is, I gather, of the same opinion."

"Then, if there is no particular change there would be no objection to his executing a legal document?" asked Miss Janet.

"None," answered Sir Davenport.

"Very well, then, that is what he wants these gentlemen for," Miss Janet went on. "You all know that the late Sir Henry Branscombe left all his money to Mr. Toms?"

They nodded. She went on,

“Now Mr. Toms feels that the will was not quite fair to Sir George and Mr. Ralph Brancombe. Knowing that even if he recovers he will probably be a cripple at the best—— Am I right, Sir Davenport?”

“I fear so, madam.”

“He feels his position, and thinks he ought to restore to the natural heir a large sum, a very large sum.”

Mr. Bones jumped from his seat. “You must be mistaken, Miss Nettlerash,” said he; “my client was no party to the will. He used no undue influence; the document is perfectly correct in every respect, and——”

“I never said it was not. The will is of course perfectly correct,” Miss Nettlerash said, with a touch of sarcasm. “No one wants to attack the will. Only Mr. Toms no longer wishes to take advantage of some of its provisions. Be quiet, Mr. Bones,” she went on, when the lawyer again attempted to speak. “You will get your precious client’s personal instructions.”

“I shall not accept them!” exclaimed he. “I shall protest against the influence brought to bear——”

“I do not think you will, Mr. Bones,” said Miss Nettlerash, significantly. “In your own and your client’s interest I think you will not. It will put an end to all litigation, Mr. Toms will still be a rich man if he lives, and there will be no scandal. What is your opinion, Mr. Inkstone?”

“I think that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred an arrangement is better than an action,” replied that gentleman.

“Very well, then we understand each other. Here we are at Silverstone.”

Now the hours had not passed very pleasantly for Mr. Toms. That gentleman had at once tackled Dr. Pyburn, when the doctor paid his daily visit.

“Am I going to die?” asked he.

“Some time or other, like all of us,” answered Dr. Pyburn.

"No, no ; don't talk nonsense. Shall I get better of this accident ? "

"I hope so."

"Tell me the truth, the whole truth, doctor," implored Toms, almost in tears.

"I always tell the truth," answered Pyburn. "I *do* hope you will recover."

"I dare say ; but shall I ? "

"That depends upon the care you take of yourself, and on your not getting over-excited, and on many other circumstances."

"But I must know, for very important reasons," urged Toms, regaining hope. "I cannot be quiet until I know."

"If you mean that you have arrangements to make concerning your property, then, I say, make them by all means ; the sooner the better," said the doctor. "They will be off your mind, and I have never heard yet that a man has died from making his will."

That expression "making his will" was horrible to Mr. Toms, and again plunged him into despair.

"Oh, doctor ! " he groaned. "Don't you think I shall get better ? "

"I told you I thought you would," repeated the doctor. "You have a very good chance, if you will be quiet."

Dr. Pyburn soon left, with some encouraging words. From hints dropped by Miss Nettlerash, he was sincerely anxious that his patient should settle his affairs, and he thought that recovery was more probable if they were off his mind. On the other hand, he saw that Toms disliked the notion of a will, and being rather a rough, strong-minded man, he despised him for it. He concluded, on the whole, that it would be better for Toms to get the matter settled and done, even at the cost of a little momentary exhaustion, and he was not surprised at being sent for when the party arrived from town. Of course he agreed with Sir Davenport that the patient was quite fit to decide on his own affairs.

Miss Nettlerash appeared in the invalid's room. "The lawyers are here," she said.

"The lawyers? Who is come besides Bones?" murmured Toms.

"Mr. Inkstone, of course," answered Miss Nettlerash. "And I brought down Sir Davenport Harley. He says that if you recover you will be a cripple for life."

Mr. Toms groaned.

"Think," she went on, "what you will suffer when you lie on your invalid couch. If you don't believe that you will die now, think of the misery you will endure for years, tied to a sofa and wheeled about in a Bath chair. Of what use will be your twelve thousand a year to you then? Remember, Throgmorton Toms, remember and repent!"

Then Sir Davenport Harley came in. He felt the patient's pulse. "Weak and fluttering, but quite fit to give his instructions," was his verdict, and the great man returned to town. The lawyers were now shown into the invalid's chamber. Miss Nettlerash would not take Mr. Toms' hint that she had better leave them, and Mr. Bones was too cowed to speak.

The energetic lady began :

"Mr. Toms is very weak, gentlemen, and cannot be troubled much. He wishes me to explain what he wants. He thinks that Sir Henry Branscombe left him too much in his will, and he would like to meet Mr. Ralph Branscombe's views by an arrangement. Is that right, Mr. Toms?"

The invalid did not dare to contradict. He shut his eyes to avoid Miss Nettlerash's gaze, and replied feebly in the affirmative.

"Would you accept a fair compromise on behalf of your client, Mr. Inkstone?" asked Miss Nettlerash.

"Certainly," replied he. "Sir George and Mr. Branscombe are neither of them here, but if the terms are fair they will gladly accept them, to put an end to litigation. I hold their powers of attorney."

"Very well, then. Mr. Toms wishes to clear the Brancombe estate of the mortgages, so that Mr. Ralph Brancombe may have the full benefit of the place. That is right, is it not?" she asked, as she again turned to the invalid.

Mr. Toms assented again, wondering whether that was all. Fifty thousand! A great deal of money certainly, but still not too much to get rid of an expensive and scandalous lawsuit, and a horrible old woman.

"Very well," Miss Janet went on: "Mr. Bones will put that down as the first condition of agreement."

Mr. Bones ventured to ask Mr. Toms if he assented.

"You have heard him say 'yes,'" Miss Nettlerash remarked, sharply. "Don't tire him for nothing. Men are always fools in a sick room."

Mr. Bones did not open his mouth again, but he and Mr. Inkstone were busy taking notes.

"The next thing is," continued Miss Janet grimly, "that within a month Mr. Throgmorton Toms, or his executors, if he should unfortunately die before then, are to hand over fifty thousand pounds in cash or approved securities to the Rev. Sir George Brancombe."

Mr. Toms almost leaped out of his pillows and bandages.

"Are you in pain?" said Miss Nettlerash, turning round to him, and gently arranging his pillows. "Let me give you your medicine."

She gave him a spoonful of restorative, and whispered:

"That is all I ask. It is exactly half of what you robbed them of. If you say a word there is an end of everything, and you *know* that you are going to die. Mr. Toms wishes this done, do you not?" she added, in a loud voice.

"Yes," murmured the sick man.

"The last condition is that the litigation is at an end, and that everybody pays his own lawyers. Put that as you like, with ten times as many words as are necessary. Now go down stairs, both of you, and write it all out as quickly as you can."

Mr. Bones tried to demur, but it was not of much use. In two hours the agreement was drawn up in duplicate, and by that time Sir George himself had arrived, and removed Mr. Inkstone's scruples. When the patient's afternoon tea was carried up it was followed by the two lawyers and the rector. Mr. Toms was bolstered up, and a pen placed in his hand; but before he signed Sir George, who never really believed evil of any man, insisted on shaking hands with the wretched invalid. When the signature was affixed and duly witnessed Mr. Toms fell back exhausted.

An hour later there was a crunch of wheels on the gravel. Mrs. Toms had returned, but her husband was in a dead faint, and she did not learn what had happened in her absence until the following day.

Ralph was on his hurried homeward journey, and no one knew his address. But on the next day he telegraphed from Paris, and in reply was told by the rector to go direct to Branscombe.

Sir George and Lady Branscombe, Miss Nettlerash, and Marian met them on the threshold.

"It is all yours again," said Miss Nettlerash, as she kissed him. "The little wretch has paid the mortgages, and you and Diana can live here all your lives!"

Ralph and Diana could not believe their ears.

"Yes, my boy," said Sir George, "your aunt has done it all. She has made Throgmorton Toms give up half of what he took from us. There is no lawsuit, and everything is settled, thanks to her, and her only."

"Will you learn to love me some day?" asked Miss Nettlerash, holding out her hand to Diana. "I was rough to you, like a cross old woman as I am. But it was for Ralph's sake."

"I know," answered Diana, grasping the hand, and kissing it before Miss Nettlerash could stop her. "And you were right. I was not worthy of him, and never shall be. But my stupid pride is gone, and I will try to make him happy."

“Aunt Janet,” exclaimed Ralph, “you have given me back my dear wife, and you have given me back Branscombe! How can I ever thank you?”

The young man threw his arms round the old lady’s neck, and kissed her warmly on both cheeks.

“You need not thank me, Ralph,” said Miss Janet, returning his kiss, “and you had better kiss your mother. I know she would rather not have me at the rectory, so I have asked for a room here to-night. I hope that you will not smoke too much, and that *you* won’t want to turn your old aunt out when she comes to stop with you.”

“Janet!” exclaimed Lady Branscombe. “How can you?”

“Oh, I know—I know,” replied Miss Nettlerash. “And, Diana, remember to make your dairymaid dry the butter properly. Nothing is so bad as water in the butter—it makes it go bad directly.”

* * * * *

There is not much more to add. Mr. Throgmorton Toms did not die of his injuries, but was crippled for several years. Mrs. Throgmorton Toms progresses in Society, and perhaps some day my readers may be told something of her adventures. Mr. Bingham soon dissolved his partnership with Handsome Joe, as the latter gentleman was too sharp for him. After a difference of opinion with a magistrate, and a short period spent in retirement, Handsome Joe established what he terms a “veterinary forge” not a hundred miles from Albany Street, Regent’s Park, where he still carries on his nefarious trade. His real name and address will be supplied on application. Mr. Bingham has retired to a suburban cottage with a modest competency, and cultivates roses. The Bankshire hounds have become almost a fashionable pack, and Ralph will probably be the new Master. Diana does not ride quite as hard as formerly, having reasons which a visit to the nursery at Branscombe Hall might explain. Marian is growing up to be a fine handsome girl, and Diana will present her next season. The Rev. C. T. Mudbury Dawson

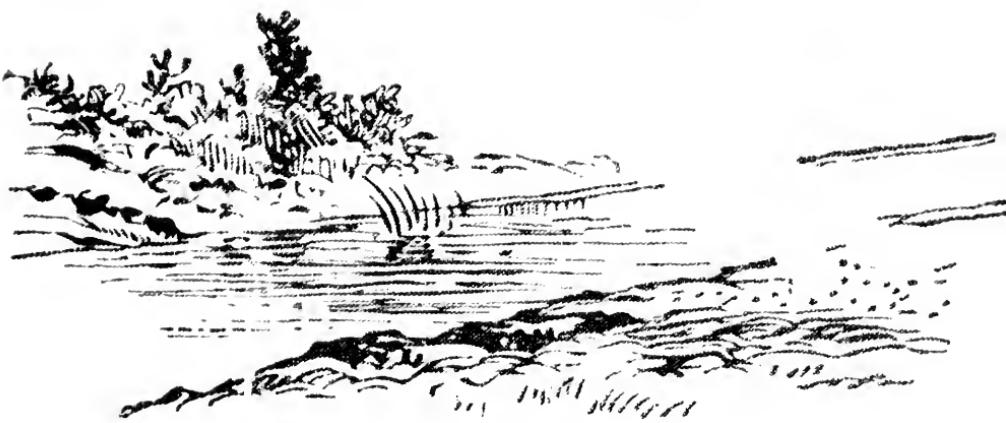
lectures in the provinces on the English language, and occasionally begs for a few pounds, which Miss Nettlerash gives him. They are spent on port wine and stronger liquors, but he still advertises his lectures and touts for pupils. Colonel Manning is in Staff employ, hard at work, and has become an ornament to the service. Mr. Saintsbury Snuffbox has given up the Holborn Vale hounds, and now hunts regularly in the Shires. Egerton Paull has been seen pretty often at Silverstone lately, and there is a little gossip about him and Marian.



THE END.



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DINA

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